

**“Presence in Our Own Land:”
Second Wave Feminism and the Lesbian Body Politic**

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Elena Gambino

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Nancy Luxon

August 2019

Acknowledgements

In a 1979 *Sinister Wisdom* interview about the first years of the Lesbian Herstory Archive, lesbian archivists Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel credit each “older woman, launching herself into the lesbian world, and finding it,” for the archive’s existence. In undertaking the great pleasure of thanking those who have made this dissertation possible, it seems an appropriate place to begin to thank those women who came out and came into lesbianism before I did – to thank them for having launched themselves into the lesbian world, for having found it, and for having created it anew again and again. It is a world that has become my home in a deeply personal and, now, intellectual sense.

I have also found a home for this work in the Political Science department at the University of Minnesota – a home whose members I now count not only as trusted advisors and mentors but also endless sources of support, encouragement, and energy. My advisor, Nancy Luxon, has been so generous with her time and energy that her office now feels like a second home. It is impossible to imagine this project without her rigorous engagement in it, her refusal to allow me to sidestep difficult questions, and her patience with me as I “muddled through” a task of this enormity. I owe her an enormous, and likely unrepayable, debt. In a significant and quite literal sense, this project could not exist without Joan Tronto’s career-long efforts to create a space in which feminist and lesbian ideas could be heard as political theory. On a more personal level, this project is indebted to those qualities that define her mentorship: care, discernment, and a clarity of thought that, without fail, reminds those in her orbit of those things that are *really* important about politics and political thinking. Tracey Deutsch, since the first seminar I took with her in 2014, has continually reminded me to think less narrowly about the

contours of my own discipline and training, and to remember that telling a history well is a powerful way to act in the world. Joe Soss has been a vocal and enthusiastic supporter of this work from the beginning, and it is undoubtedly stronger for the courses that I took with him early in my graduate career, where I first encountered the thorny issues of method, difference, and hierarchy that have shaped this work.

As lesbian feminists constantly reminded us, no intellectual work can flourish in the halls of the academy alone; work that remains attuned to the challenges and possibilities of working with, for, and amongst others requires loving relationships to sustain it. I am lucky enough to have built such relationships in Minneapolis, my home of six years. Amy “Amisoun” Fairgrieve, Zoë Rodine, Jenna Dreier, and Kristina Popiel, Rachel Mattson, and John, Candice, and Emma Greenwood have not only been seemingly boundless sources of love, but have also been fierce protectors and keen interlocutors for these six years. David Lemke, Matt Dreier, Craig Harper, David Andrews, Yon Ji Sol, Jennifer Jodell, Misha Hadar, and Britt van Paepeghem have taught me to understand that the labor of friendship, and the bridge of graduate school, can bring people together in unexpectedly lovely ways. My cohort members – in particular, Elif Kalaycioglu, Tracey Blasenheim, Avi Muñoz, and Shai Gortler – have not only shaped my understanding of what it means to be “in conversation” with others, but have also given me the very real hope (uncommon in the academy) that the future of the discipline is bright. Sam Duling, Samarjit Ghosh, Garrett Johnson, Baruchi Malewich, Emily Mitamura, Farrah Tek, Charmaine Chua, Chase Hobbs-Morgan, David Temin, Adam Dahl, Zein Murib, Robert Nichols, Bryan Nakayama have all, at various times and in various ways, taught me something fundamental about politics and about being a

colleague. Finally, it is worth mentioning that this departmental home could not exist without the apparently tireless labor and truly incredible patience of our department staff: Jessie Eastman, Alexis Cuttance, Tia Phan, and Sara Flannery.

Minneapolis has not been my only home, and I am lucky to have had the support of many friends and colleagues outside the university. Ellen Bastoni, Cara Bastoni, Jessie Strasbaugh, Corey Florindi, Connor Goldsmith, Amanda Shubert, Martina McLennan, Cayla McNally, Sarah Sheplock, and Steve Jones were my earliest support systems; I've since been lucky enough to add to that list Ashley Vernot, Tori Heath, Megan Freiman, Eli Freiman, and Tara Dewan-Czarnecki (along with David, Mina, and Jonah). Intellectually, this project has been shaped by various members of Political Theory, including Lawrie Balfour, Lida Maxwell, Kathy Ferguson, Elizabeth Wingrove, Nina Hagel, Michael Ferguson, Lorna Bracewell, Stephen Engel, and Delia Popescu, whose comments on drafts and presentations of this work have made it all the stronger.

It would not have been possible to do the work of this dissertation without the financial support of the University of Minnesota Graduate School, the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota, and the Mellon Foundation. The Department of Political Science, from the beginning of my time there, has made it possible not only to complete a dissertation, but to complete the one that I wanted and needed to write. The Mellon-funded Sawyer Seminar at the University of Minnesota provided me with a fellowship during the 2018-2019 academic year which, in addition to offering me the opportunity to be a part of a truly revelatory set of conversations, allowed me time to conduct my archival research. And the University of Minnesota Graduate School provided me with a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship during 2019-2020 that made

it possible to complete the work of thinking and writing. Finally, staff at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the Feminist Theory Archive at Brown University, and the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, NY have made much of this work possible, not only because they possess the know-how to guide a doctoral candidate in her first fumbling visits to the archive, but also because they have done the invaluable work of preserving and maintaining the important collections at the center of this project.

No home is complete without family. In addition to my chosen family, I am so fortunate to have had the support of my parents, Hannah Stewart-Gambino and Jack Gambino, throughout this process. Words cannot express the power of having been raised by two people whose dedication to teaching and research – and to the impact that these activities can have on each one of us and on the world – made it possible to imagine myself as “Dr. Gambino.” My sister, Madeline Gambino, has been from her first moments a keen observer of the world, a force to be reckoned with, and a loyal friend to those around her. My grandmothers, Patricia Gambino and Caroline Stewart, have – though sometimes I think they have questioned the sanity of the academy – proven that pride in and care for one’s loved ones can overcome even the most obvious differences. The newest members of my family, Spencer Philpot, Steve and Kathy McCarthy, Kelly Anne McCarthy, and Justin McCarthy, have made my life all the richer since I met them.

Finally, if these acknowledgements attest to the care, labor, and energy that it takes to sustain a humbling catalog of homes, then it is impossible to imagine – truly – my life without the one that Katie McCarthy has built with me. Katie has launched herself into the world with me, and what we have found is that, together, we can create space, build trust, and move into the future, lovingly.

Abstract: This dissertation reconstructs the political theorizing of lesbian feminists ranging from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. It argues, in contrast to the popular “wave narrative” of feminist theory, that theirs was a uniquely intersectional and coalitional politics; moreover, it suggests that the wave metaphor both covers over and forecloses many of the intersectional and coalitional insights that lesbian feminists developed during this period. Since the early 1990s, queer theorists have raised serious concerns about lesbian feminism, arguing that its central assumptions are essentialist, exclusionary, and homogenizing. In contrast to this commonplace reading of lesbian feminism, however, I argue that lesbian feminism was neither essentialist nor exclusionary; in fact, lesbian feminists promoted a political praxis grounded in confronting and repairing the harms of racism and inequality within their movement.

I develop my argument in three parts. First, I show that not only is the widespread view of lesbian politics as reactionary and undemocratic largely inaccurate, but that queer theorists’ central argument – that queer theory is a more *exemplary* approach to intersectional politics – paradoxically erases and reduces the contributions of lesbians of color, even as it claims them as antecedents. Second, I reconstruct the diverse political claims made by lesbian feminists by turning to archives often overlooked by political theorists, such as the magazine *Sinister Wisdom*. I show that the practice of racial responsibility developed in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom* by lesbian feminists such as Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maria Lugones, Adrienne Rich, and Monique Wittig, among others, offers valuable insights for theorists grappling with how to imagine more radical and accountable coalitions. Finally, I argue that while the political challenges posed by lesbians have historically been considered less sophisticated than queer theories, the lesbian conception of accountability is a point of contact with contemporary theories of grounded responsibility that contest central concepts of political theory such as the social contract. I conclude by arguing that by challenging these central concepts and by advocating for a politics of grounded responsibility, lesbian feminism offers a promising path towards exceeding some of the intractable impasses of contemporary political theory.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction:</i> Lesbian Feminism Beyond ‘The Waves’	1
<i>Chapter 1:</i> “A More Thorough Resistance”?	
Coalition, Critique, and the Intersectional Promise of Queer Theory	61
<i>Chapter 2:</i> The Loving Public	
Separation, Transformation, and Political Speech in Lesbian Feminist Theorizing	108
<i>Chapter 3:</i> Politics as Sinister Wisdom	
Reparation and Responsibility in the Lesbian Feminist Counterpublic	167
<i>Chapter 4:</i> Lesbian Existence	
Seeing from the ‘Oppressed Point of View’	219
<i>Chapter 5:</i> “Our reality is the fictional:”	
Wittig, Lorde, and the Lesbian Body Politic.....	264
<i>Conclusion:</i> Turning the Century	
Lesbian Feminism and Coalition.....	306
<i>Bibliography</i>	323

Introduction

Lesbian Feminism Beyond 'The Waves'

*Some ideas are not really new but
keep having to be affirmed from the
ground up, over and over.*

- Adrienne Rich¹

The scene at the *Second Sex: 30 Years Later* conference was chaotic. It was September 27, 1979 – the third full day of activities at the conference, which brought nearly 1,000 feminist academics and activists to New York University's campus to debate the future of feminist theory. According to Carol Anne Douglas, who covered the event for the magazine *off our backs*, the event was billed as the most comprehensive reevaluation of feminist theory to date: "Speakers would include," she wrote in *oob*, "academics, radical feminists, lesbian feminists (although the word "lesbian" was not mentioned in the program), socialist feminists, and feminists I am not sure how to describe."² Frictions, of course, were to be expected. "The express purpose of the conference," as Jessica Benjamin, one of the conference's organizers, would later put it, "was to make sure that we included as many groups as possible and had an open discussion of all differences" – and these differences were sure to yield some disagreements.³ But no one seemed to anticipate what would happen in the conference's final hours: a deep, divisive explosion over the wounds of racism and homophobia within feminism.

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986 [1976]), xv.

² Carole Anne Douglas, "2nd Sex Thirty Years Later: Feminist Theory Conference," *off our backs*, (December 1979): 4. From the Wittig Papers, Beinecke Library at Yale.

³ Jessica Benjamin, "Letter to Lester Olson," in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 33(3) 2000; 289.

The explosion, according to the conference participants, was precipitated by Audre Lorde's speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."⁴ In the open mike session following her speech, which was the last programmed event of the day, issues of internal racism and homophobia which had simmered just below the surface for three days finally erupted. According to Douglas, once Lorde finished her speech, attendees jumped to the microphone:

One woman said she thought this conference lagged behind the movement as a whole in dealing with Black women because it took place in academia.

Another woman said, "We lesbians have helped you women with analysis, put on conferences, worked on abortion, rape, child abuse, etc. When are you going to do something for us? ..."

A member of the planning committee said she was a bit disturbed at all of the criticisms of the planning. "We have planned for a whole year. We know it has problems. But have you ever been at a conference where hundreds of women have discussed heterosexuality and lesbianism the way we have? I'd like to do the same with race."

Jessica Benjamin said that it was past time to end the conference. Should we cut off speaking at the mike? The audience, tired of the lack of time for discussion, screamed, "No!" [...]⁵

In the face of these vociferous complaints, the conference organizers were both frustrated and baffled: "Despite the fact that we had organized the conference to address differences among women," Benjamin writes, "the audience largely consisted of many women ready to protest that their group had been excluded."⁶ What had begun as a comprehensive attempt to cover "what is and isn't being done in feminist theory at the moment"⁷ quickly began to simmer with unspoken frustrations – frustrations which boiled over, according

⁴ The full text of the speech appeared in the same *oob* issue in which Douglas' assessment of the conference was printed. Five years later, it was also anthologized in Lorde's collection of essays *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

⁵ Douglas, "2nd Sex," 26.

⁶ Benjamin, "Letter," 287.

⁷ Douglas, "2nd Sex," 26.

to Benjamin, in the explosion of “a discourse that was brand new to all of us: that of identity politics.”⁸

Contemporary readers might sense the resentment in Benjamin’s statement, which she penned in 2000 in defense of her work on the conference. By invoking the phrase “identity politics” to describe her frustration with the unexpected protests over racism and homophobia, she evokes a trope that contemporary feminist and queer theorists have all but worn out: the sense that the 1980s were a time of division and resentment – *impasse*, really – over the lived differences between women. Indeed, leveling criticisms at 1980s “identity politics” are, by now, second nature for feminist and queer theorists. Under this common framing, the 1980s were to be a period in which resentments over feminism’s exclusivity, internal policing, and growing acrimony were bubbling over, only to be left unresolved, unheard, and unaltered. Indeed, scenes like the open mike evoke what Alice Echols famously coined the “eruption of difference;” such frames, in turn, provide contemporary theorists with seemingly airtight evidence that the 1980s were a time of fracture and fatigue.⁹ In fact, in what follows, I will suggest that whether one criticizes “identity” by recourse to the language of *différance*,¹⁰ wounded attachments,¹¹

⁸ Benjamin, “Letter to Lester Olson,” 289.

⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

¹⁰ This term, of course, is Derrida’s, though in feminist theoretical circles it has most extensively been deployed by Gayatri Spivak to claim that “the constitution of the subject *in life* is the place of the *différend*.” “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Williams and Chrisman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); 97.

¹¹ Coined by Wendy Brown in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), “wounded attachments” refers to identity’s “impulse to inscribe in the law and in other political registers its historical and present pain rather than conjure an imagined future of power to make itself,” 66.

performativity,¹² or “the incoherent dispensation,”¹³ the phrase invokes the flawed and ultimately unsuccessful ways that feminists during the 1980s proposed to deal with differences between women. At the same time, contemporary theorists suggest, these purported flaws of 1980s feminisms evidence the urgent need to attend to intra-group power and privilege – a need that they figure as ground zero for the methodological innovations of 1990s “third wave” queer theory. If scenes such as the open mike session ushered in a decade of intractable hand-wringing over identity, queer theorists suppose, then transcending the failures of the 1980s must require relinquishing the attachments – and, with them, the failures – of the period.

Benjamin’s assessment of the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference is far from the first dismissal of scenes like the one following Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” speech. What’s peculiar, however, is the degree to which criticisms of ‘identity politics’ have come to be associated with lesbian feminism in particular. Most critiques of the period begin, for example, by invoking Alice Echols’ condemnation of “cultural feminism” in her 1989 book *Daring to be Bad*. Cultural feminism, for Echols, was the strand of feminist practice, fueled by the “gay/straight split,” which “turned [feminism’s] attention away from opposing male supremacy to creating a female counterculture... [In cultural feminism], the focus became one of personal rather than social transformation.”¹⁴ As

¹² The notion of performativity first appears in Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1990]), and is given further treatment in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993); 307-320.

¹³ Eve Sedgwick uses this phrase to denote the fundamental paradox between universalizing and minoritizing discourses inherent in making identity claims. *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 5.

Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp would later point out, Echols' condemnation of cultural feminists for recasting politics "completely in terms of their lifestyle"¹⁵ is strongly associated with lesbian politics – "Although lesbian voices are among those raised in condemnation of cultural feminism," they write, "the boundary in common usage between cultural feminism and lesbian feminism is highly permeable, if it exists at all."¹⁶ Similarly, Victoria Hesford has more recently argued that the "feminist-as-lesbian" has

tended to be the figure through which generalized perceptions of second-wave feminism have been organized as memory in the academy and in queer and feminist subcultures... she often stands for the perceived essentialism of second-wave feminism and for the limits of its cross-class and cross-race alliances.¹⁷

For Echols, and for a generation of scholars following her landmark text, a lesbian thus emblemizes the enervating – the *failed* – dimensions of radical feminism. When theorists and historians describe the 1980s as a time of fracture and fatigue, then, much of the blame tends to rest on lesbians for having relied on "cultural" understandings of feminism: because so-called "cultural feminists" – lesbians – were obsessed with elevating a gynocentric culture, they are responsible for enabling a problematic attachment to "identity" against which feminism in the 1990s had to assert itself.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Women's Cultural and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," in *Signs* 19(1), 1993; 33-34.

¹⁷ Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 15.

¹⁸ Indeed, criticisms of "cultural" feminists were deployed to justify all sorts of theoretical, historical, and political interventions in the 1990s. As I will suggest below, the purported failures of "cultural feminists" – that is, *lesbian* feminists – have been used to motivate various turns toward the poststructuralism of Derrida, toward the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, towards "queer" understandings of intersectionality and identity, and other ostensibly "third wave" theoretical paradigms.

In addition to making a strong claim about the weakness of lesbian “lifestyle” claims at the expense of radical feminism’s more political dimensions, implicit in the moniker “cultural feminism” are the charges of feminism’s “deadly sins:” essentialism, reactionary conservatism, and an anti-democratic tendency to privilege one (white, middle class, cisgender) standpoint over all others. In her reflections on her own experience in a lesbian separatist community, Kathy Rudy, for instance, argues that lesbian feminist politics is a fundamentally essentialist endeavor. While Rudy takes issue with Echols’ claim that cultural feminism hastened the demise of feminist politics, she *does* accept the notion that lesbianism, at its core, was inherently identitarian. Rudy claims that while essentialism as an ideology “was, for many of us for a very long time, a very viable politic,”¹⁹ its flaws were also apparent from the beginning:

Class, race, regional, or religious issues and struggles were forced into secondary positions or overlooked entirely. We [lesbians] began policing ourselves in order to guarantee that our members were faithful to the principle of putting women first.²⁰

Because lesbians spent considerable time and energy “policing” their own internal unity, Rudy argues that critiques of exclusivity by lesbians of color *outside* the relatively homogenous white lesbian community set a process of fracture – what Echols called the “eruption of difference” – in motion:

As white, middle class lesbian feminists read [lesbian of color] works, we began to realize that the things we thought of as essential to womanness – and upon which lesbian feminist politics had been built – largely described white, middle class women.²¹

¹⁹ Kathy Rudy, “Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 27(1), 2001; 200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

For Rudy, finally, this fracture made it possible to sort lesbian feminists into groups: those who cared about race, class, religion, gender identity, and so on (those, in her telling, who would eventually turn to the more inclusive “third wave” of queer theory) and those whose commitment to essentialism overrode these concerns. Difference, she writes, “directly clashed with the central tenet of radical feminism... A posture of openness to all was difficult to take up on a community built on exclusionary politics.”²² Reflecting on the charges leveled at lesbianism by Echols and Rudy, it is not difficult to see how the contemporary charge that lesbian politics are irrevocably bound up in “identity politics” has gained traction.

In contrast to this commonplace narrative, in what follows I will argue that however much accounts like Benjamin’s, Echols’, and Rudy’s seem to tell a transparent historical story about feminist theory’s unfolding from radical politics to fracture, and from fracture to “identity politics,” this narrative about identity, essentialism, and uncritical gynocentrism do not tell the whole story of the lesbian feminist 1980s. Making this case, I’ll argue, requires that feminist historians and theorists return to scenes like the open mike session at the *Second Sex: Thirty Years* later conference to ask not about the failures that they portend, but the promises they held. It would require that feminists set aside frameworks that insist on the insufficiency of lesbian feminist thinking to ask how – and why – we have written the real substance of these scenes out of our histories and our politics. In this dissertation, I will suggest that doing so reveals fundamentally different political challenges and resources than those associated with “identity” politics.

²² Ibid., 205.

In returning to scenes like the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference and many other similar scenes throughout the 1980s, I will argue that the common interpretation of this era of lesbian theorizing as primarily concerned with an essentialist, exclusionary identity is an egregious oversimplification of the period. While depictions of identity politicking in the 1980s often lead theorists and historians to seek new ways of conceptualizing individuals, relations of power, and political futures – new ways that would later come to be exemplified by “queer” theory – Douglas’ depiction of the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference, however inadvertently, highlights a different reality. A second glance at the conversation following Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” speech reveals how deeply entangled claims about the status of lesbian and Black identities within feminist circles were. That the grievances of Black (and) lesbian feminists could be articulated as analogous and overlapping in the open mike session reveals that, on the eve of the 1980s, Black (and) lesbian women felt themselves to be vulnerable to erasure, invisibility, or exclusion in interlocking ways – vulnerable, indeed, in ways that could be co-articulated in the terms of “identity” that Lorde’s speech (and many other texts across racial, classed, and sexual differences in the 1980s) laid out. If *The Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference offers a window into a more racially and sexually dynamic 1980s feminism than is often depicted in contemporary academic work, misreadings of 1980s “identity politics” appear all the more egregious as one’s picture of the decade becomes fuller. In fact, a brief glance at the landmark feminist works of the 1980s reveal that the outcry over Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” was far from fractious; in fact, it emerges from a profoundly generative era of thinking about the *intersections* between Black (and) lesbian lives.

Instead of taking for granted the notion that “the eruption of difference” ushered in the problematic discourse of identity politics, then, I suggest in this work that feminist historians and theorists ought to pursue how and why these vulnerabilities were co-articulated. For example, I will argue that the political ideas and resources that Black (and) lesbian feminists developed exceed and decenter the critiques of “identity” that have characterized their resentful presence in contemporary theory. Just as importantly, this dissertation will show that lesbian political thinkers of the 1980s resisted incorporation into the narratives of identity, fracture, and wounded attachments that underpin “third wave” queer critique today. Finally, I will outline the political resources that these resistances offer for a more robust intersectional politics in the contemporary moment.

Writing against the Waves

This dissertation, at its most basic, pursues these historical and political claims by probing what I will argue are the *deeply* intersectional, coalitional, and political commitments of lesbian – and especially lesbian of color – feminism during the 1980s. On the eve of the 1980s, feminists were engaged in a dialogue about what it meant – and what it *could* mean – to speak for, with, and about other women. That this dialogue, represented not only by Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” remarks but also by thinkers who will appear throughout this work – Cherrie Moraga, Marilyn Frye, Maria Lugones, Barbara and Beverly Smith, Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig, and many others – could be represented merely as an “eruption of difference” that ushered in the failed project of identity politics is a remarkable historical revision.

For one, the commonplace lens of “identity politics” has deeply entrenched a version of history that loosely follows the “wave” metaphor, in which feminist theorizing unfolds through a series of progressive inclusions that run parallel to a set of increasingly sophisticated methodological innovations. On this view, the “first wave” culminated in the contestation of *women’s* exclusion from the institutions of public life, the “second wave” culminated in the contestation of *women of color’s* exclusion from feminism itself, and the “third wave” culminated in the contestation of *the intersectional queer’s* exclusion from symbolic and discursive representation in both feminism and the broader culture. On a common reading, these waves of exclusion have pushed feminists to acknowledge the limitations and failures of their own frameworks, moving from a singular emphasis on white, middle class women to a broadened horizon that acknowledges the fluctuations of women’s identities across lines of race, class, sexual and gender identity, nationality, religion, disability, and so on. This framework, which understands feminism to have gradually expanded its critical aperture as feminists grasp and overcome their own failures over time, is neatly summarized in the first paragraph of Denise Riley’s *Am I That Name?*:

The black abolitionist and freed slave, Sojourner Truth, spoke out at the Akron convention in 1851, and named her own toughness in a famous peroration against the notion of woman’s disqualifying frailty. She rested her case on her refrain ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ It’s my hope to persuade readers that a new Sojourner Truth might well – except for the catastrophic loss of grace in the wording – issue another plea: ‘Ain’t I a fluctuating identity?’ For both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of ‘women’ are essential to feminism. *This its history makes plain.*²³

²³ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1. Emphasis mine.

Riley's claim that feminist theory and activism move together towards a necessarily more flexible, democratic, and subversive praxis – that “If the seductive fraud of ‘woman’ is exposed... the ground is prepared for political fights to continue, armed with clarity”²⁴ – seems obvious enough. A *new* Sojourner Truth, armed with knowledge of the failures of suffragists and second wave feminists alike, would take a different, more sophisticated line of attack. If ‘woman’ will always *exclude* some potential ally in feminist struggle, better to embrace indeterminacy in the name of *inclusion*: “Not woman, but women,” Riley writes: “then we can get on with it.”²⁵

Alongside this narrative of gradual inclusion into a tenuous and unstable “feminist and queer” coalition are the methodological innovations that make it possible to read this history as a progressive account. According to Mary Hawkesworth, for example, by creating tools such as “gender as an analytical category” and “standpoint theory as an analytical tool” (two “second wave” inventions), as well as “intersectionality as a guiding research principle” (a “third wave” innovation), feminist and queer theorists have been able to “raise new questions for research, illuminate power relations masked by traditional methods of inquiry, and demonstrate deficiencies in dominant accounts.”²⁶ Marking both the “waves” and their methodological inventions as moments in a continuous – albeit rocky – journey towards justice and inclusion, Hawkesworth suggests that such accounts teach us to “consider... the potential for their further use to achieve the transformative goals of feminist scholarship.”²⁷ On the one hand, as Hawkesworth’s

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.

²⁶ Mary Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 13.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

more recent work makes clear, these “waves” are less historical fact than a shorthand for organizing the complex, controversial, and contestatory history of feminist and queer theories. Because these debates can seem internecine, acrimonious, and abstract, Hawkesworth – like many, many feminist political theorists – argues that metaphors like the waves, while artificial, can serve the useful purpose of illuminating “a cogent account of the *politics of knowledge*, explaining how ‘facts’ can be contentions, and why supposedly neutral accounts of political life are seldom what they seem.”²⁸ Hawkesworth is right to point out that there have been broad, overarching shifts in the evolution of feminist inquiry – and that illuminating these shifts can help us understand how truly impactful feminism’s politics of knowledge has been.

Still, in this dissertation I will argue that telling the story of feminism’s rich, diverse, and complex contributions to knowledge through the heuristic of the “three waves” is not as benign as it may seem. In fact, it requires feminists – and, in particular, feminist political theorists – to take up a very peculiar historical sensibility that *does* more than simply organize and thematize various feminist contributions over time. Seeing lesbian feminism as an inherently flawed identitarian discourse unable to wrestle with questions of race and racism, for example, requires a certain historical sensibility that, at best, causes political theorists to see and think of lesbians of color as excluded outsiders rather than the central and deeply influential political thinkers that they were. However, this is simply not a historical reality. As the chapters that follow contend, lesbians of color were extraordinarily involved in lesbian feminist publishing,

²⁸ Mary Hawkesworth, *Gender and Political Theory: Feminist Reckonings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 21.

conferences, writing, and theorizing; moreover, their provocations incited, inspired, and motivated many of the sea changes we now associate with the three “waves” of feminist theory.

First, then, this dissertation builds on the work of a growing number of historians who have contested the idea that “second wave” politics were inherently flawed by their exclusive, or even primary, emphasis on white middle class women. This body of scholarship has moved significantly beyond thinking about the women’s, gay, and queer liberation movements as unfolding linearly as feminists gradually come to grasp and transcend their own limitations and failures. Instead, historians and some theorists have begun to focus on “the range of feminisms” and its “many founding events.”²⁹ Thus, while feminist political theorists have largely used the “waves” as a kind of shorthand for various key concepts and frameworks for conducting feminist research, feminist historians have made a convincing case for thinking of feminisms, *plural*, as organized around various spatial, institutional, ideological, economic, and other nodal points, rather than unfolding in a progressive temporality towards greater inclusion.³⁰

²⁹ Linda Gordon, “The Women’s Liberation Movement,” *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of the American Women’s Movement* (New York: Norton, 2014), 71.

³⁰ Such works include, but are far from limited to, Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington*

In an essay detailing these developments in the field of feminist history, for example, Sara Evans argues that it was “academy-based theorists” – not the participants in the various contexts of second wave feminism themselves – “who fixed the perception of 1970s Second Wave feminists as white, middle-class, self-interested, and anti-sex.”³¹ While Evans maintains that such perceptions *did* identify “a real weakness in feminist self-representations,” they have also impoverished feminist scholarship empirically and politically by encouraging misconceptions about second wave feminism that erase women of color and retroactively homogenize the “women” in Women’s Liberation. Making this case more explicit, Leela Fernandes argues in *No Permanent Waves* that the homogenizing tendencies of the wave metaphor are, in practice, much more than heuristic trade-offs. “One of the underlying effect of the three-wave model of feminism,” she writes, “is the inadvertent representation of feminist thought as a teleological historical narrative of progress and inclusion.” She continues,

By framing new challenges to the existing terms of feminist thought and practice as a new “wave,” such work is defined primarily as a move toward the increasing inclusion of women of color within feminism. In other words, according to this historical narrative, if second wave feminism was the preserve of white, middle-class women, third wave feminism marked a new phase in which feminists of color and questions of race and gender were now included. The feminist wave model thus implicitly rests on a narrative of multicultural inclusion.³²

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Kelly Hanking, *The Girls in the Back Room: Looking at the Lesbian Bar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

³¹ Sara M. Evans, “Women’s Liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly,” *Feminist Studies* 41 no. 1 (2015): 141.

³² Leela Fernandes, “Unsettling ‘Third Wave Feminism:’ Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect,” *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 100.

According to Fernandes, the heuristic model of the “three waves” reproduces, however inadvertently, a narrative of multicultural inclusion. The problem with this, she writes, isn’t just that it’s an oversimplification: what the “wave” metaphor covers over and obscures, she argues, is the fact that contesting a politics of “inclusion” in favor of a more capacious understanding of political possibilities is *precisely* the point of much of women of color feminism from the 1970s onward. Drawing on Chela Sandoval’s theory of “differential consciousness”³³ to describe the ways that women of color feminism of the 1970s and 80s exceeds and rejects a politics of multicultural inclusion, Fernandes suggests that

the writings and challenges that feminists of color produced did not represent a simplistic rejection of or progression beyond previous modes of feminist consciousness or practice. Rather these writings produced a distinctive form of consciousness that simultaneously occupied, moved between, and produced new spaces and sites of thought and practice.³⁴

Pointing out the irony of deploying these critiques of “inclusion” to advocate for a more inclusive feminism, Fernandes goes on to argue that the wave model thus “[transforms] feminists of color writing within the historical period of the second wave into a subject dislocated from their historical context.”³⁵ Thus, for Fernandes and many other feminist historians, when political theorists rely on the “wave metaphor” as a way of organizing the broader contributions of feminist theory, they risk both erasing the political actors whose ideas motivate shifts in theoretical frameworks *and* subverting – even contradicting – the actual content of those ideas.

³³ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³⁴ Fernandes, “Unsettling ‘Third Wave Feminism,’” 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

Evans and Fernandes are far from alone in identifying how the “impetus within interdisciplinary feminist scholarship to emphasize the creation of concepts or linguistic expressions that can capture [a] sense of newness and rupture” have, paradoxically, foreclosed the very political insights that motivate historical change. In this sense, as Julie Gallagher puts it, the “waves” metaphor is thus a historical construct that, by virtue of having been cited and recited over time, has come to overshadow and occlude the very historical context it is intended to illuminate. As a construct, the “waves” metaphor

creates and reinforces exclusivity; it illuminates only certain kinds of activism that were engaged in by a limited set of historical actors... By reifying the metaphor, some scholars have consciously and others have inadvertently weighed in on the question of who and what deserves to be covered in the history of feminism, and in doing so have excluded the work and struggles of many women.³⁶

As Gallagher and her interlocutors point out, narratives that emphasize the relationship between the three waves of feminism and their methodological innovations tend to privilege “periods when middle-class white women were most active in the public sphere” and obscure “women of color, working-class women, women with disabilities, lesbians, and older women who engaged in activism that responded to overlapping forms of oppression.”³⁷ In fact, Gallagher writes, “When these women do appear, it is generally for one of two reasons:”³⁸ they are either figured as outsiders who must be included in a promising new feminist coalition that smooths over differences, or used to motivate

³⁶ Kathleen Laughlin, Julie Gallagher, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, Premilla Nadasen, Stephanie Gilmore, and Leandra Zarnow, “Is it Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Wave Metaphor,” *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (2010); 82-83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

changes in (predominately white) academic feminism without serious engagement with their ideas, activities, and claims.

Thus, the stakes of reconceptualizing 1980s lesbian feminism are more than just historical; they signal the extent to which the debates around so-called “identity politics” have not only narrowed the terms of debate in which we understand the feminist past, but have also displaced, erased, and covered over important resources for understanding the political challenges of coalition that are, today, more urgent than ever. To consider lesbians of color as excluded outsiders – to view them as simply crusaders from without contesting their exclusion – brackets their physical presence and centrality in lesbian feminist spaces throughout the 1980s and excises their ideas, concepts, critiques, and claims from our understanding of feminism itself. Paradoxically, then, in attempting to write a history that pays homage to the various struggles for “inclusion,” the wave narrative runs the risk of erasing the *actual ideas* of the very women whose intellectual presence feminists rightly seek to affirm. Revisiting lesbian feminism – and reconceiving of the 1980s not as a period of fracture and fatigue but of questions of responsibility and repair – thus *does* more than deepening our historical understanding of this period; it pushes us to raise difficult political questions about solidarity and responsibility that have been written out of this history and are, too often, ignored by contemporary theorists.

Relinquishing Identity: (Dis)Identification and Vanishing Lesbian Politics

However important it may be both historically and politically, though, displacing the “wave” framework is more difficult than it first appears. In fact, effecting such a displacement on a general level would require disrupting several commonplace concepts

and narratives about the failures of second wave feminism, in particular, that are so generally accepted that they seem like natural starting points for theorists. However, although feminist political theorists have been largely reticent to enact such disruptions, the field is not without interventions into the commonplace narratives about the second wave. Kathi Weeks, for instance, has argued that

the 1970s has until recently been most often remembered as something of an embarrassment: the time when feminists essentialized the category of woman, neglected race, constructed maniacally totalizing theories, and exposed themselves in public with their intemperate speech, overwrought emotions, and utopian dreams. Sometimes it is as if the whole period is now recalled within scare quotes; the daring and ambition of feminist thinkers and activists in the 1970s is often recoded in the historical memory of the field as naïveté and failure.³⁹

Arguing, as I did above, that “this is not a mere matter of inattention” and that “the shame and disavowal that often characterize feminism’s own historiography suggest that a more active mode of forgetting is at work,”⁴⁰ Weeks argues in favor of rendering the 1970s “untimely” – that is, of appreciating “the content of a vision that requires us to imagine ourselves as radically other.”⁴¹ In a similar vein, Victoria Hesford has written that feminist political theorists’ tendency to disavow the second wave is an effect of their (our) attachment to *certain* “rhetorical forms, metaphors, and phrases” that simplify, contain, and “white-out” the political possibilities of the 1970s and 80s.⁴² Lorna Bracewell, too, has argued that an affective attachment to historical “starting points” like the infamous 1982 Barnard Conference has obscured and erased the full range of feminist

³⁹ Kathi Weeks, “The Vanishing *Dialectic*: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 no. 4 (2015); 735.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 735.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 751.

⁴² Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 17.

engagements and preoccupations.⁴³ As these theorists have shown, displacing the “wave” metaphor is more complicated than simply correcting the historical record; it requires confronting and actively disrupting a series of affective attachments to certain narratives, origins, and disavowals that have come to occupy a privileged place in feminist theory.

Following these intuitions, in the chapters that follow I will argue that if feminist political theorists hope to resist the distorting effects of the “wave” metaphor, they (we) ought to develop alternative ways of conceptualizing the contributions, contestations, and controversies of the second wave *beyond* the narratives of failure that have dominated feminist theory for at least two decades. However, rather than ask after the affective attachments and (dis)avowals that have shaped this historiography, as many of the theorists above have persuasively done, this work instead moves to displace the problematic of “identity politics” altogether. I do so not to suggest that our lingering attachments to this framework aren’t incredibly powerful, but to suggest that the process of re-attaching to new narratives and organizing concepts will require moving, eventually, to new ground.

The central argument of this work, then, is that we might better understand the tensions around lesbian feminism that emerged in the 1980s by thinking of it as an emergent *public* rather than as an *identity category*. Doing so, I will suggest, not only shifts the vocabulary that historians and political theorists alike typically use to describe feminisms past, but also shifts the very founding assumptions of feminist political theory. Rather than conceptualizing the *object* of lesbian feminism as a set of ontological and

⁴³ Lorna Bracewell, “Beyond Barnard: Liberalism, Antipornography Feminism, and the Sex Wars,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 no. 1 (2016); 23-48.

epistemological questions (what does it mean *to be* a lesbian? what are the political effects of *speaking as* a lesbian?), I will argue instead that we begin from a set of *political* questions (who do lesbians claim to speak for, about, or with? Does calling forth lesbian feminist *audience* shift the requirements or responsibilities of political engagement with others?). When we understand lesbian feminism as an emergent public, I will argue, new kinds of structures, relationships, and political challenges come into view that, despite being topics of considerable debate during the decade, have since come to be reduced to merely the discontents of “identity politics.”

Before turning to my argument about the content of lesbian feminist publicity – a politics that I will argue are deeply *intersectional and coalitional* – let me say something about how criticisms of identity came to dominate contemporary frameworks for understanding this era. How is it, for example, that feminist and queer theorists came to a set of conversations about what it meant *to be* a lesbian, rather than asking questions about what it meant to exist *in community* with other lesbians? How do these criticisms mobilize a set of methodological and political interventions that now appear transparently progressive? What do these moves cover over by marking lesbian feminism as an identity rather than a public?

Struggles over identities have tended to point theorists towards the complex negotiations associated with the politics of naming: that is, what does it mean *to be* a lesbian or to *call oneself* a lesbian? While today this question seems an intuitive place to begin interrogating the politics of lesbian feminism, in fact it is a distinctive product of queer theory’s analytical imposition on lesbian feminism; in other words, it was not until the 1990s that feminist and queer thinkers began thinking of lesbianism primarily as an

attempt to define a state of *being* rather than an attempt to create new kinds of public relationships. The question of being was most famously raised in Judith Butler's 1993 essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," which opens on Butler's "anxiety" about "the 'being' of being homosexual." "To write or speak *as a lesbian* appears a paradoxical appearance of this 'I,' she writes, because it

is a production, usually in response to a request, to come out or write in the name of an identity which, once produced, sometimes functions as a politically efficacious phantasm. I'm not at ease with 'lesbian theories, gay theories,' for as I've argued elsewhere, identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.⁴⁴

For Butler, invoking a political scene that is occasioned by the sign "lesbian" requires an identification with a stable category of being, which inevitably entails the impulse to police boundaries and, ultimately, produces constitutive exclusions. Instead, Butler would advocate a politics that troubles the very activity of "being" a lesbian, calling upon the language of performativity to evoke a practice that "de-institutes" that identity. It is not that "I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian," Butler writes, "but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies.... One risk I take is to be recolonized by the sign under which I write, and so it is this risk that I seek to thematize."⁴⁵ Ultimately, Butler argues that intervening at the level of what it means to "*be* a lesbian" will be "a matter of working sexuality *against* identity, even against gender, and of letting that which cannot fully appear in any performance persist in its disruptive promise."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 308.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 308.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 318.

Butler frames this intervention not only against “identity” itself, but against an alleged failure of lesbian feminism during the 1980s to adequately address the many kinds of differences that made it impossible to name or define a single, coherent group of “lesbians.” In so doing, she draws on a number of contemporaneous scholars who, like Jessica Benjamin’s post-hoc assessment of the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference, understood the 1980s to have exhausted the possibilities of identity as an organizing political stance. (In *Identity Politics*, for instance, Shane Phelan argues that if 1970s lesbian feminism had claimed that “lesbianism was in itself a vanguard position, a base for truly feminist politics and consciousness,” this politics exhausted itself as lesbian feminists began to argue that “One’s body and its desires became a more reliable guide to one’s loyalties than words or public deeds.”⁴⁷) In her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler reflects on her turn towards poststructural theory by arguing that

Whereas many feminists in the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, *Gender Trouble* sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most basic about being a woman; it does not consecrate feminine ity or signal a gynocentric world. Lesbianism is not the erotic consummation of a set of political beliefs... Instead, the text asks, how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis?⁴⁸

Similarly, in “Against Proper Objects,” Butler expands her critique of “lesbian” theory not just to emphasize the need to address normative sexual hierarchies, but also racial and classed ones. “Lesbian” theory by the late 1980s had, according to Butler, developed a

⁴⁷ Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 45-49.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xi.

“construal of feminism as exclusively focused on gender.”⁴⁹ This mistake – born of an identitarian impulse to claim mastery over the “proper object” of lesbian theory –

not only denies the history of U.S. feminist claims for radical sexual freedom, but also denies the emergence of a feminism specific to women of color in the U.S. who have sought to complicate the feminist framework to take account of relations of power that help to constitute and yet exceed gender, including race and racialization, as well as geopolitical positionality in colonial and postcolonial contexts.⁵⁰

For Butler, then, “lesbian” theory not only insisted on a restrictive and rigid naming practice, but had politically excluded feminists across racial, classed, geographic, and other differences. Queer theory, at its best, represented for Butler a turn away from these conceptual and political foreclosures and instead towards a “remapping of the terms of debate and... a kind of intellectual trespass which values the expansive possibilities of such confrontations over the retreat into intellectual territory.”⁵¹

Importantly, then, queer theorists like Butler – although they often contest the ‘wave’ periodization on paper⁵² – participate deeply in the notion that lesbian feminism exhausted itself and that a resignification of its content was necessary. Because theorists like Butler define queer performative politics very much *against* the lesbian political practices of the 1980s, theorists concerned with reinterpreting lesbian feminism have largely followed Judith Butler in raising questions about the ‘being’ of lesbian identity rather than what I will argue is the publicity of lesbian feminism. In her introduction to

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 vol. 2 and 3 (1994); 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵² Indeed, Butler’s “Against Proper Objects” presents itself as a trenchant criticism of progress narratives like the “wave” metaphor, even as it reinscribes the narrative of failure and transcendence that underpins it.

the tellingly-titled volume *The Lesbian Postmodern*, for instance, Robyn Wiegman labors to reconcile the ways the volume's focus on something (someone?) named "a lesbian" with the ways that this figure has been "constituted as critical currency by contemporary academe."⁵³ For Wiegman, the paradox that Butler outlines – the fact that any attempt to define what it means to *be* a lesbian is complicit in a set of regulatory regimes – suggests a further complication. Even if one were to constantly track these moments of identification so as to resist them, Wiegman argues, self-avowed lesbians still risk overdetermining their own identifications by reading their own performativity as a new kind of "master narrative." "Now we know that we can't possibly know," Wiegman writes about what it means to "be" a lesbian, "and in this we master the category of knowledge, overcoming its indeterminacy and instability."⁵⁴ For Wiegman, then, the only way to accept the failures of 1980s, *lesbian* identity is to relinquish one's attachment to identity *altogether*. In other words, where Butler argues that lesbians might "de-institute" their attachment to identity by recognizing its inherent instability, Wiegman suggests that even this politics of performativity remains complicit in exemplary politics – an attachment to mastery, control, and stability – that must be relinquished:

If I were willing to turn to modernist ground, I might rationalize this complicity by asserting my intention to retrieve or restore the lesbian to her rightful cultural and critical visibility, a project of reclamation through which the figure of the lesbian could be named, defined, and owned by a so-called lesbian herself. But can my claims for the lesbian as lesbians, for what "I" am or am supposed to be, deter in any way the commodifying moment through which the lesbian appears, bound here to one of the most egregiously overused and misconstrued theoretical terms circulating in Western academic discussion? Rather than freeing myself from the commodity aesthetic, wouldn't my claim to know the lesbian simply

⁵³ Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern," in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

confirm my position as her most masterful consumer, a commodity myself now mastered by the image I take myself to be?⁵⁵

Refusing the regulatory dynamics that come with *any* attempt to “be” a lesbian, even performatively, then, becomes the central political task of both lesbian feminism and the postmodern academy; it is a politics in which the central task is to encourage “the refusal to jettison contradiction in favor of modernity’s quest for totality and coherence, for a singular and romantic tapestry, unified regardless of its many colored threads.”⁵⁶

In the same volume, Judith Roof argues in “Lesbians and Lyotard” that *even the desire to relinquish metanarratives* that Wiegman associates with “the lesbian postmodern” can install the risks of naming. Roof traces this danger through the example of Penelope Engelbrecht’s essay “‘Lifting Belly is a Language:’ The Postmodern Lesbian Subject,” in which Engelbrecht argues that lesbian desire *is*, at its core, postmodern in nature. This move, argues Roof, represents the desire to stabilize the loss of metanarratives that postmodernism portends:

For example, to prevent the postmodern from usurping the position of marginal challenge, one simply names it lesbian. To transform the covert gender politics of the postmodern, one simply appends it to a lesbian category understood to challenge gender binaries. To avoid the frustrating denial of the bases of identity politics and experiential discourse so necessary to the mustering of feminist institutional position, one links oneself to the postmodern critique of those practices as an effective identity politic.⁵⁷

Roof’s thus casts considerable suspicion on the attempt to resolve tensions that inhere in naming oneself “a lesbian.” On the one hand, as Butler and Wiegman point out, the very act of calling upon some stable identity to articulate one’s politics puts one in the position

⁵⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷ Judith Roof, “Lesbians and Lyotard,” *The Lesbian Postmodern* ed. Laura Doan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 53.

of becoming complicit in regulating that identity. On the other hand, however, Roof argues that articulating “the lesbian” as a *destabilizing* agent – one whose very presence signals the loss of metanarratives – risks installing itself in “the place of controlling any unknowing.”⁵⁸ Thus, debates over “lesbian identity” reveal an oddly paradoxical political maneuver: the very moment that naming “the lesbian” becomes possible, claimants must relinquish the name and the practices it signifies. Giving up “lesbian” as a privileged site of postmodern politics, for Roof, enacts a “desiring *process* rather than a definition of desire [which] may make possible a relinquishment of the urge to power that characterizes naming gestures.”⁵⁹

By deploying the instability of *being* a lesbian to show the attachments by which subjects invest in exclusionary identities, these authors thus suggest that “the lesbian” offers *only* a cautionary lesson: the historical valences of “lesbian identity” in these texts, then, are important less for teasing out the political content or commitments of lesbian feminists themselves than for substantiating a broader claim about the risks of identity politics in general. Thus, in much post-lesbian theorizing, these lessons become incorporated into feminist theory in ways that completely sidestep *actual* lesbian feminists. In other words, a post-lesbian feminism would require an acceptance of the impossibility of identity. Thus, in Joan Scott’s recent articulation, feminism *is* the act of continually assuming and relinquishing identity; this roving desire is the only ethical and critical form of attachment possible. “Our agency – our desire – is critique,” Scott writes;

⁵⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 63. Emphasis mine.

it is “the constant undoing of conventional wisdom, the exposure of its limits for fully satisfying the goals of equality... Critique, as desire, provides no map.”⁶⁰

As Hesford points out in *Feeling Women's Liberation*, though, these sorts of histories – that is, ones that understand “lesbian” on terms that privilege lesbian feminism’s attachments to identity and encourage theorists to turn instead to poststructural demands to relinquish identity altogether – tend to fall into the same patterns of evacuation and erasure that the “wave” narrative reproduces. As they continually cite the purported debates and controversies over identity that roiled in lesbian feminist circles, such histories tend to efface the range of diverse arguments about lesbian feminism that circulated by emphasizing only their identificatory practices at the expense of the many other dimensions of lesbian feminist theorizing. At the same time, they discourage contemporary historians and theorists from revisiting the real content of these debates by suggesting that lesbian feminism’s greatest accomplishment was, in fact, its failure. Thus,

In the desire to order and account for the movement’s rise and fall, the very real presence of racism, heterosexism, and classism in the movement becomes calcified into a unified account of the movement that tends to cement, rather than bring into question, the ahistorical assumptions that women’s liberation... was a racist and classist movement. The presence of other voices, groups, and political affiliations at the beginnings of the movement are elided and covered over in the attempt to account for the movement’s limitations and failures... What counts as history ultimately is not the complex, contradictory, heterogeneous mess of any moment or era but a story that is already familiar.⁶¹

For Hesford, then, the “feminist-as-lesbian,” a figure that she distinguishes from “the historical specificity of lesbian feminism” is more organizing specter than historical fact.

⁶⁰ Joan Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 43.

⁶¹ Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 11-12.

In organizing itself around the disavowal of identity, queer theory thus produces “lesbian” as a figure who represents *only* political failure and invites supersession;⁶² in other words, she is the figure that underpins the “wave” metaphor as an organizing historical narrative.

In addition to reproducing the patterns of evacuation and erasure that shape the wave metaphor, then, critiques that mistake lesbian feminism for an identity tend to pre-judge the political content of lesbian feminism *before* or *instead* of contending with its historical and political content. But however much these post-lesbian frameworks feel familiar to us today – and however intuitive their interventions into “second wave” politics might appear – criticisms of lesbian identity like those found in the works of Butler, Wiegman, and Roof rely, as titles like *The Lesbian Postmodern* suggest, on postmodern and post-structural theories that were largely external to feminist and lesbian feminist theory for much of the 1980s. In fact, it was Jacques Derrida – not feminists or lesbian feminists themselves – who warned in 1984 that Women’s Studies was poised to become “just another cell in the university beehive.” Cited in the now-canonical edited volume *Women’s Studies on the Edge*, Derrida continued:

Do the women who manage these programs, do they not become, in turn, the guardians of the Law and do they not risk constructing an institution similar to the institution against which they are fighting?... It is certain that the range of work in women’s studies is enormous, and that there are already a considerable number of problems to pose, of bodies of work to study, of objects to define, and that women’s studies has a great future. Nevertheless, *if this future is of the same type as that of all other departments, of all other university institutions, is this not a sign of failure of the principles of women’s studies?*⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 15.

⁶³ Cited in Joan Scott, “Introduction: Feminism’s Critical Edge,” *Women’s Studies on the Edge* ed. Scott. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1. Emphasis mine.

Nowhere in the edited volume does one of the contributing authors contest Derrida's contention that Women's Studies, because of its peculiar relationship to the institution of the academy, was *even in 1984* already poised for failure. When we take "defining identity" as the central political and interpretive goal of feminist studies and then submit that goal to deconstructive methodologies, it cannot come as a surprise that the entire endeavor is deemed, however melancholically, an "impossibility," an "idiom of failure," a "dulling" of critical imagination.

But why should we take Derrida's word for it? Why should we believe, for example, that women's studies in the 1970s and 80s stood poised on the precipice of identity politicking, ready for disciplinary containment, or doomed to failure? Derrida, of course, was not present at the 1979 *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference, nor was he a part of the capacious debates around feminist publishing, racism and homophobia, or intra-group responsibility and repair that characterize the lesbian feminism I present in this work. However, it is *his* assessment of the impending failures of women's studies that motivate the notion that the goal of lesbian feminism should be to critique and relinquish its own claims to existence. After citing Derrida in the opening lines of *Women's Studies on the Edge*, for example, Joan Scott goes on to conclude that "to restore feminism's critical edge" is to define feminism "not as the perpetuation and protection of orthodoxy but [as] critique."⁶⁴ "Critique," she writes, "does not offer a map that leads to a guaranteed future; rather, it disturbs our settled expectations and incites us to explore, indeed to invent, alternate routes."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 7.

If queer critiques of lesbian feminism represent an “alternate route” that self-consciously depart from lesbian feminist conceptions of politics, this work will ask what the consequences of that departure have been. By raising the question of paths not taken, I aim not only to disarticulate “lesbian theory” from its figural position as queer theory’s flawed antecedent, but also to push it back into conversation with several strands of contemporary political theory with which I believe it has more directly in common. While the theories and politics of lesbians in the late 1970s and 1980s have very little in common with “queer” readings and politics today, they *do* articulate a politics that coincides with conversations around reparations, refusals, and intersectional solidarity-building.

At the same time as I will insist that contemporary theorists would do better to conceive of lesbian feminism as an attempt to call forth a new kind of public, however, I will also work to distinguish the specific form of publicity that lesbian feminists promoted from the ways that the “public sphere” is currently debated in contemporary theory. I do so not only to suggest, as many other scholars already have, that various “rememberings” of the feminist past – and of the *lesbian* feminist past, in particular – are bound up in discourses about the failures, co-optations, and aporia of feminism in the present.⁶⁶ Though these imbrications are surely important, I aim instead here to discover, on the one hand, *how* the “feminist-as-lesbian” came to “[figure] the contested and

⁶⁶ See Katie King, *Theory in its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women’s Movements*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995); Joan W. Scott, ed., *Women’s Studies on the Edge*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

unsettled nature of the relationship between the past and present of women's liberation," and to explain how contemporary political theorists' have failed to develop an "accountability toward the eventfulness of the movement as something unfinished and beyond the capacity of any one story or account to know or apprehend it in the present."⁶⁷ On the other hand, however, my aims here are not only empirical; in showing that lesbian feminist attempts to grapple with the publicity of their own work are *irreducible* to academic feminist and queer theory's characterizations of lesbian feminism as an attempt to establish an identity category, I aim to open up a space for the reconsideration of lesbian feminism as a political resource beyond its specter-like existence in contemporary theory.

The Turn to Publicity

Consider again the context of the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference. Queer theorists, perhaps following Benjamin's interpretation of the scene, might see in the event a conflict over deep divisions in "woman" as *a shared identity*. As a consequence, they might interpret the divisive and contested nature of the event as a symptom of the implicit failure of the project of lesbian identity and the need to relinquish identity politics altogether. In other words, when contemporary feminist and queer theorists begin from the assumption that lesbian feminism is inextricably engaged in an essentialist and exclusionary identity politics, they tend to argue as Butler, Wiegman, and Roof do, that "lesbian identity" must be relinquished in order to make way for the more capacious political activity of constant resignification. Rather than view

⁶⁷ Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 210-211.

such an event through this lens of failure and supersession, however, I would argue instead that we understand scenes like this one from the vantage point of the actual space of the conference room; that is, in terms of questions about who might get to hold the microphone, occupy a seat in the room, give a presentation, or ask a question. More important than questions about identity, then, are questions about the relationships of speech, reception, responsibility, and accountability. These questions, unlike those that ask what it means “to be” a woman, a lesbian, or even a feminist, are instead ones that raise questions about what it means to speak and theorize with and amongst others. In political theory, questions like these are typically associated not with a politics of identity but with a politics of *publicity*. Instead of understanding lesbian identity as something that must be relinquished in order to inaugurate a more inclusive and flexible politics, then, in this work I will insist that we think of lesbian feminism as an attempt to call forth a fundamentally new kind of public – a public that would transform both the relations between individuals within the public and the institutions and practices that sustain those relations.

The term “publicity,” of course, evokes a long tradition in political theory stretching from the ancient Greeks to their contemporary interpreters. Canonically, publicity refers not only to the sphere of political and economic institutions as it is distinguished from the private sphere of the household, but also to the privileged place of reason – and, with it, argumentation and persuasion – in politics. Publicity as a political concept, then, differs from the colloquial usage of “public:” while public things are often understood to denote spaces that are held *in common* (such as public parks) or ideas that are *shared* amongst various distinct individuals (as in public opinion), publicity in the

history of political thought denotes instead the process of advancing, contesting, defending, and interrogating ideas about the best way to organize political life. Aristotle, for instance, emphasizes the public role of persuasion in making judgments about political issues,⁶⁸ which contemporary scholars have understood as an appeal to deliberative or even agonistic models of democracy.⁶⁹ Likewise, Kant famously wrote that public reason is “the use which anyone can make of [reason] as a *man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*,”⁷⁰ suggesting that it is only in publicly critiquing and reflecting on political matters that individuals and societies reach enlightened – or “enlarged” – maturity.⁷¹ John Stuart Mill, like Aristotle and Kant, saw public contestation as an irreducible feature of political life; while individual reason is fallible, building collective relationships of critique and contestation might allow for sounder political judgments.⁷² More recently, even, thinkers from Michel Foucault to James Tully have argued that the goal of “public philosophy” is a distinct form of political thinking that rejects doctrinal or law-like thinking in favor of a “critical attitude;” that is, one that

⁶⁸ Aristotle argues that “not even the possession of the most exact scientific knowledge would make it easy for us in speaking to persuade some listeners on the basis of it... Instead, it is necessary to produce our means of persuasion and arguments (*logos*) out of common things...” *The Rhetoric*, trans. CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018), 12.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos. “Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere,” *The Journal of Politics* 61 no. 3 (1999); 741-757.

⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” *Political Writings, Second Edition*, ed. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

⁷¹ As Chantal Mouffe and others point out, Kant’s conception of an “enlarged” political perspective stems directly from his use of publicity as a way of organizing, managing, and directing contestation from within an inherently plural community. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁷² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Dover, 2002).

“begins by questioning whether the inherited languages of description and reflection are adequate to the task.”⁷³

Thus, despite the obvious political and philosophical differences between these canonical thinkers, the issues and challenges that attend their emphases on “publicity” are, on the whole, vastly different from those that attend “identity;” in particular, they point not to problems of inclusion and exclusion, but instead to *relationships* between various members of “the public,” and to the forms of speech, spectatorship, and deliberation that sustain these relationships. By invoking this language to describe lesbian feminism, then, I mean to suggest that scenes like the *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference have less to do with simple or straightforward exclusions than they do with how, and how well, the relationships of persuasion, contest, and accountability *within* feminist and lesbian feminist circles function. Viewed in this light, Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” is less an indictment of an exclusionary (white) feminist group than it is an appeal for the feminist “public” to reflect on and account for its present limitations.

Despite a recent shift in feminist political theory towards thinking about publicity as a practice of freedom (to which I will return shortly), however, for many feminists turning to the language of publicity may nonetheless come as a surprise. Indeed, while many feminist historians and a handful of feminist political theorists have turned away from the “wave” metaphor as an organizing framework for understanding the

⁷³ James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19. Here, the language of “critical attitude” that Tully uses is drawn directly from Foucault’s “What is Enlightenment?,” which is itself an engagement in Kant’s essay on public reason. *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007 [1997]), 97-120.

movement's history, turning towards a concept overlaid by the distinction between public and private seems a dubious move. As a generation of feminist scholars have pointed out, traditional conceptions of "publicity" as a way of life in which the "central concern... [is] to talk with each other" has, for much of the tradition of political thought, been foreclosed to women. For these feminist critics, canonical theorists of publicity have assumed that the stuff of argument, persuasion, and collective accounting were distinct and separate from "private" matters such as home life, sexuality, and care work – that is, "women's" matters. Importantly, feminists have also been reticent to conclude with more recent theorists that women must be "included" in the traditional public sphere while the private realm is simply displaced and ignored.⁷⁴

Taking these criticisms of publicity seriously remains one of the first and most important tasks of any feminist intervention. By invoking the language of "publicity" to describe lesbian feminism, then, I do not mean to suggest that lesbian feminism reproduces or mirrors the canonical usages of the term. In fact, it was in response to just these criticisms of the canon of political theory that much of lesbian feminism emerged: instead of asking whether women can or should be included in the public sphere, the thinkers that populate this dissertation turn repeatedly to the question of what a politically transformative feminist *counterpublic* might look like. As I will argue below, the sort of counterpublic that lesbian feminists envisioned during the 1970s and 80s is distinct both

⁷⁴ As Susan Moller Okin points out, "justice cannot be achieved without thorough examination and critique of the public/domestic dichotomy;" *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 111. Putting an even finer point on the matter, Carole Pateman once wrote that "the dichotomy between the public and the private... is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about." Carole Pateman, "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy," in *Private and Public in Social Life*, ed. Stanley Benn and Genrald Gaus (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

from traditional conceptions of the public and private spheres *and* from more contemporary appeals to inclusion in public life. Before detailing the specifics of this conception of a lesbian feminist counterpublic, however, let me make one more distinction: namely, the distinction between the lesbian feminism that appears throughout this work and the Arendtian conception of publicity that has occupied feminists for the last two decades.

As I have suggested, feminist theorists have long held that a truly radical politics must reject both traditional conceptions of the public sphere *and* the perceived threats of “identity politics.” In fact, for many feminists, these two impulses are deeply connected: if the boundaries of the public sphere have canonically *excluded* women, the thinking goes, these exclusions have led to the misguided belief that granting special recognition to those excluded on the basis of identity will solve the problem. The problem with such an identity-based solution to the exclusions of the public sphere, however, would seem to be that it reifies and reproduces the excluded identity itself; identity politics, then, not only fails to radically transform the relationships that sustain the public sphere, but also reproduces *precisely* the kind of exclusions, fractures, and intractabilities that it seeks to contest. In seeking to develop a specifically feminist conception of publicity, then, contemporary feminist theorists have sought resources in thinkers whose work avoids either reifying the presumed exclusion of “women’s” issues from the public sphere, on the one hand, or reproducing bounded and exclusionary categories like “women” or “lesbians,” on the other.

Take, for example, two essays in a major edited volume on Arendt’s work: Mary Dietz’s “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt” and Bonnie Honig’s “Toward an

Agonistic Feminism.” Both Dietz and Honig argue that Arendt is uniquely situated to disrupt and enliven feminism’s own engagement with publicity. In Honig’s words,

Arendt’s politics is a promising model for those brands of feminism that seek to contest (performatively and agonistically) the prevailing construction of sex and gender into binary and binding categories of identity, as well as the prevailing binary division of political space into a public and private realm.⁷⁵

Similarly, for Dietz, Arendt’s conception of “action” (as opposed to *identity* or *inclusion*) as the central concern of political life “releases” feminism from the “reaffirming strategy of difference feminism that posits the generic-genderic ‘woman,’ and the complicating strategy of diversity feminism that posits a hybridized subjectivity... as gender-race-class-ethnicity-sexuality...”⁷⁶ For Honig and Dietz, the appeal of Arendt’s thinking for feminism is precisely the fact that, having rejected traditional disciplinary debates and their discontents, she seems to move feminism outside of or beyond the impasses of the second wave.

Turning with only a little trepidation to Arendt to “overcome” the problems of identity politics in new ways, then, feminists following Dietz and Honig have pointed out that the requirements of publicity – speech, persuasion, and collective accounting – are both less epistemologically fraught and more politically robust than debates over naming or “being” that characterized identity-based claims to recognition.⁷⁷ On what terms, for

⁷⁵ Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism,” *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 136-137.

⁷⁶ Mary Dietz, “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 34-35.

⁷⁷ Citing Aristotle, who famously juxtaposed politics – the stuff of public life – and the home, Arendt argued in *The Human Condition* that

To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade,

example, should debate, argumentation, and “talking with each other” take place? One way of answering the question is to follow Arendt herself; this route, in fact, has been followed by a broad swath of contemporary feminists. Thinkers such as Linda Zerilli and Lisa Disch, for example, have situated the political task of contemporary feminism in Margaret Canovan’s definition of Arendtian publicity: for Arendt, writes Canovan,

the realm of politics is a matter of people sharing a common space of appearance in which public concerns can emerge, and acting in the presence of one another. For real politics to be going on, it is not enough to have scattered private individuals voting separately and anonymously according to their own lights. The people need to be able to see and talk to one another in public: to meet in a public space so that public concerns will become visible to them. This means that her conception of the public realm is as different as possible from the common view according to which ‘the public’ are a mass of unassignable individuals who do not know one another and do not form a group. Instead, to form a public in her sense, people need to be united around an arena in which common affairs can appear and be debated.⁷⁸

Indeed, because Arendt’s conception of publicity is distinct from traditional understandings of the public sphere and emphasizes the performative, argumentative, and

were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside the *polis*, of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers...

Central to Arendt’s rendering of Aristotle is the capacity for speech and persuasion: what marks publicity and *political* life is both the capacity to make arguments and the capacity of address. Thus, “everybody outside the *polis* – slaves and barbarians [and, of course, women] – was... deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of *a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.*”⁷⁷ Publics, according to this definition, necessarily exceed debates over the status of the self; organized around the activities of speaking and arguing, persuading and diverging, publicity is something that takes place with other people who, as often as not, disagree. See *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 27.

⁷⁸ Margaret Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm,” *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hichman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); 194.

fragile accomplishments of political life, feminists concerned with thinking of feminism and feminist theory have tended to turn towards her writings.

Linda Zerilli also argues that Arendt's turn to publicity, though not overtly allied to feminist goals, is a turn towards plurality and non-sovereignty in ways that reflect but differ from queer theory's impulse to relinquish feminist attachments to stable identities. Arendtian publicity, she writes, teaches us that the excesses of debates over identity – debates “in which the price for attending to differences, what separates us, appears to be the absence of anything that relates us”⁷⁹ – might be overcome by turning instead to the principle of publicity. The point of understanding feminism and feminist theory as a *public* endeavor, she writes, is less to emphasize the need to include women in existing institutions or to reclaim some kind of long-lost solidarity, but to “affirm, in a democratic political sense, freedom as a world-building practice based on plurality and nonsovereignty.”⁸⁰ For Zerilli, a failure to address the *public* nature of feminism is a common thread across the “three waves” of feminism:

To assume, as many first- and second-wave feminists did, that a shared gender identity is what relates women politically is flawed not only because, as third-wave feminists claimed, differences among women matter and the very category of identity is suspect. It is flawed because it does not answer to the question of what possible relevance identity can have for feminist politics absent a space in which to articulate it as a *political* relation. Third-wave critiques, too, are mostly silent on how to constitute the political space in which the transformation of social relations, including gendered forms of subjectivity, is to occur.⁸¹

Thus, to the extent that feminists have become ensnared in a set of unproductive debates over various ways of conceptualizing inclusion, they have failed to see that what is really

⁷⁹ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

political about politics is the activity of speaking for, with, and to others. Thought in terms of publicity, feminist theory can become a version of what Lisa Disch has described as Arendtian “storytelling.” “its purpose... is not to make a descriptively accurate report of the world” or to “define [a] phenomenon” but, instead, to “[communicate] one’s own critical understanding in a way that invites discussion from rival perspectives.”⁸²

What’s striking about the turn to Arendtian publicity, however, is that Arendt herself was no feminist: as Honig herself points out, Arendt was “impatient with feminism, dismissing it as merely another (mass) movement or ideology. She believed strongly that feminism’s concerns with gender identity, sexuality, and the body were politically inappropriate. She worried that these issues might overwhelm the public sphere and she herself approached them through indirection and allusion.”⁸³ (In response to this dismissal of feminist concerns, Adrienne Rich famously wrote that *The Human Condition* was a “lofty and crippled book” that “embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology.”⁸⁴) Still, in spite of these intense divergences between feminist thinkers and Arendt herself, feminist political theorists have pursued her thinking at the expense of feminist theorists of publicity themselves. In fact, some feminists have justified their use of Arendt for feminism precisely *because* she is not a

⁸² Lisa Disch, “More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory* 21 no. 4 (1993); 689.

⁸³ Bonnie Honig, “Introduction: The Arendt Question in Feminism,” *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* ed. Bonnie Honig. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1-2.

⁸⁴ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. (New York: Norton, 1979), 212.

feminist. As the arguments above implicitly suggest, Arendtian feminists see her work as useful in its ability to step back from the intractable, acrimonious excesses and impasses of feminism – the “sex wars,” the “gay/straight split,” the rise of cultural feminism, and the resentments of identity politics. In a curious justification of Arendt’s anti-feminism, for instance, Honig argues that Arendt’s distaste for feminist politics might have more to do with second wave feminism’s failures than with an inherently anti-feminist streak in Arendt herself. Indeed, Honig resolves the tensions between Arendt’s “impatience” with feminism and contemporary feminist concerns, rather unsurprisingly, by distancing “the feminisms of 1995” from “those that Arendt so hastily dismissed.” While *that* feminism was essentialist, gynocentric, and dichotomizing, “the [new] feminisms of 1995 [are] shaped by new multicultural and postcolonial contexts.” She continues,

recent work in feminist theory tends to focus on *plural* asymmetries of power, on how sex-gender identities are driven by race, class, nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality are often feminized or sexualized. Whatever Arendt might have thought about these developments, they enable a set of feminist engagements with Arendt’s work that are quite different from those of their predecessors.⁸⁵

Here, Honig’s defense of Arendtian publicity as a resource for allaying the impasses of feminist theory reveals itself as a less straightforward argument than it initially appears; smuggled in under the guise of moving *beyond* the fractures that characterize binaries like “second wave/third wave” or “identity/difference” is yet another version of the “wave” metaphor that I have suggested tends to evacuate the actual content of feminisms past. In Honig’s telling, while the failures of second-wave feminism motivate and justify the turn to Arendtian publicity, feminist theory itself needs a synthetic thinker like Arendt to point out and actualize its real potential.

⁸⁵ Honig, “Introduction,” 2.

Does feminist theory need an Arendt? In keeping with my emphasis on publicity – and its component parts speech, audience, and accountability – I would argue that one’s answer to the question has to do with the forms of political speech that one finds persuasive. Arendt and lesbian feminists both attempt to confront difficult political questions such as the tension between collective action and plurality; turning outward from feminism to analyze them may have as much to do with the presumed legitimacy of mainstream philosophy than it does the inherent failures of feminist thinking. I would not, however, be the first to make that case: consider, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff’s argument that the politics of “speaking for others” are embedded in a discursive context where certain forms of argumentation are privileged over others. The intuition that writing, language, and discourse are the central tasks of politics, Alcoff argues, has been “discovered” by many different kinds of writers, including credentialed philosophers, Black feminists, fiction writers and poets, and many others. However, “the *discursive style* in which some European poststructuralists have claimed that all writing is political marks the claim as important and likely to be true for a certain (powerful) milieu, whereas the style in which African American writers made the same claim marked their speech as dismissable in the eyes of the same milieu.”⁸⁶ For Alcoff, the matter is not only the fact that “European poststructuralists” and “African American writers” had discovered the *same* fundamental truth. Quite the opposite: Alcoff argues that the *manner* in which this “truth” is communicated, accepted, and adopted into the “discursive context” of, for example, critical theory in fact *comes to bear on* the meaning of “the

⁸⁶ Linda Martín Alcoff, “Speaking for Others,” *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); 103.

truth itself.” If feminist theory *needs* Arendt or another philosopher to actualize its claims, it may not be because of feminists’ inherent essentialism; in fact, these claims about “need” themselves may instead be evidence of the very hierarchies of legibility, authority, and accountability that feminist thinkers sought to problematize. These hierarchies, as Alcoff suggests, not only represent the intellectual choices we make as scholars, but in fact affect the very nature of the “truths” we uncover.

Thus, like the queer thinkers who have turned to post-structural thinkers like Derrida to understand the relationship between feminism and the academy, the turn to Arendt to describe feminist publicity oddly evacuates the very real conversations around these issues that feminists *did* have throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As generative as these engagements with philosophy have been, I have suggested that their (perhaps unconscious) reliance on the “wave” metaphor has produced an asymmetrical relationship between the lesbian feminists that populate these pages – thinkers such as Lorde, Moraga, Rich, Wittig, and many others – and the philosophers whose work moves “beyond” feminists’ own limitations. As Alcoff’s understanding of the issue makes clear, when theorists attempt to synthesize issues of feminist publicity by turning to writings by philosophers and theorists external to feminist spaces, they risk not only covering over the history of those ideas, but in fact implicitly reinforcing hierarchies of legibility that make *certain* claims to publicity (for example, those articulated in philosophical language) over others (those, perhaps, written by everyday lesbian feminists in the pages of magazines, anthologies, and stories).

On Politics, Method, and the Archive

Feminist political theorists and historians need not settle for accounts that proceed as if feminism needs an external framework to be politically useful. Audre Lorde's "Master's Tools," for example, *is* and *should be considered* a discussion of precisely "how to constitute the political space in which the transformation of social relations, including gendered forms of subjectivity, is to occur," as Zerilli calls for. Similarly, the open mike session following her provocations suggests that Lorde's is an attempt, like Disch's "storytellers," to communicate "one's own critical understanding in a way that invites discussion from rival perspectives." In keeping with this intuition, in this work I will situate the insights of lesbian feminists like Lorde in the contemporaneous conversations, debates, and disputes – such as those over race and racism, betrayal and repair, identity and self-determination – that shaped them.

Tracking these debates in contemporaneous archives so as to make clear the political and conceptual resources of lesbian feminism, though, presents a methodological conundrum. Because lesbian feminist ideas have been largely dismissed as inadequate by political theorists (even feminist ones), their material presence in the feminist archive has been gradually but consistently excised, and replaced with narratives about their philosophical essentialism and their dependency on exclusionary concepts like experience. However, as difficult as it is to think through the politics of lesbian feminism without retroactive reference to these post-hoc "third wave" critiques, traces of their presence have not been altogether lost. In this work, then, I attempt to reconstruct an archive of lesbian feminism by turning to these traces. Throughout this work, I locate them in the discursive spaces – magazines, journals, presses, and conferences – in which

lesbian feminists developed their political thinking together. Moreover, I make the case that interpreting lesbian feminist politics through the lens of their *own* archive significantly changes the resources one can find in this era of political writing.

In reconstructing a lesbian feminist archive that does not superimpose the assumptions of the “wave” metaphor on this period of political thinking, then, I have turned to several sources that have allowed me to understand lesbian feminism as an intellectual and political community in its own right. First, two physical archives – the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, NY and the Feminist Theory Archive at Brown University’s Pembroke Center – have aided me in the important work of contextualizing the work of well-known lesbian feminist authors and texts. These archives have provided invaluable insight into the kinds of relationships between and among authors that bring lesbian feminist publicity to life. Rather than documenting only *what* was being said by amassing the intellectual products of the period, as academic anthologies tend to do, these archives have preserved the documents – letters, announcements, conference proceedings, funding proposals, and calls for papers – that reveal the networks and relationships out of which lesbian feminists produced their work.

However much these archives provide much of the important historical context that brings this era of political theorizing to life, however, many problems with the archive remain. In particular, as theorists of the archive have long pointed out, archives – even feminist ones – are far from neutral repositories of information. For Foucault, for example, the archive operates according to an often overlooked relation of authority; it represents overlapping relations of authority and subordination that determine which

histories can be told and in what way.⁸⁷ Thus, it is not enough to recognize that the archive is an incomplete space. One must recognize that the archive's absences and erasures are no accident; they are the products of distinct, lived relations of authority that, together, make up the "law of what can be said."⁸⁸ While some historians have suggested that researchers might *manage* the power relations that shape "what can be said" by hewing closely to a set of replicable research methods,⁸⁹ feminist and queer historians and theorists have pushed these concerns about the ethical limitations of the archive into the fore and have developed, in response, alternative methodological approaches that expand, challenge, and trouble our conception of an archive itself. One such approach employed by many scholars of queer history is the turn "from a focus on 'effective' history to a focus on 'affective history.'"⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. Smith. (New York: Pantheon, 1982). If Foucault theorized the archive as a set of overlapping relations of authority, deconstructionist scholars such as Derrida and Spivak have argued that it is impossible to *represent* the past in a neutral way. Foucault's conception of the archive as a form of discursive "law" is often discussed in tandem with Derrida's now-classic essay "Archive Fever." For Derrida, like Foucault, the archive is a space not only to preserve the past, but to almost ritualistically categorize and index its contents in a process of what he calls "consignation."

⁸⁸ If Foucault theorized the archive as a set of overlapping relations of authority, deconstructionist scholars such as Derrida and Spivak have argued that it is impossible to *represent* the past in a neutral way. Foucault's conception of the archive as a form of discursive "law" is often discussed in tandem with Derrida's now-classic essay "Archive Fever." For Derrida, like Foucault, the archive is a space not only to preserve the past, but to almost ritualistically categorize and index its contents in a process of what he calls "consignation."

⁸⁹ See, for example, Katherine E. Tirabassi, "Journeying into the Archives: The Pragmatics of Archival Research," in *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, ed. Ramsey, Sharer, L'Eplattenier, and Mastrangelo. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 169-180.

⁹⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 31.

Affective history, according to its proponents, rejects orientations to the archive based in technique, in *managing* the shortcomings of the archival record through pragmatic research methods. Instead, it seeks an alternative archive altogether that its proponents claim better reflects the ineffable nature of the past. Such an approach, argues David Halperin in his now-famous affective intervention, “[trains us] to recognize conventions of feeling as well as conventions of behavior and to interpret the intricate texture of personal life as an artifact... of a complex and arbitrary constellation of cultural processes.”⁹¹ By reconstructing a queer history that cannot be classified, enclosed, or codified because it is *felt* rather than *produced*, these scholars contend we might better understand the excesses and erasures of queer culture over time as complex relations of authority. In so doing, scholars such as Heather Love and Ann Cvetkovich argue that we might better attend to the ambivalent ethical responsibility research have to the past; as Love puts it, “we cannot help wanting to save the figures from the past, but this mission is doomed to fail... In part, this is because the queer past is even more remote, more deeply marked by power’s claw; and in part because this rescue is an emotional rescue, and in that sense, we are sure to botch it.”⁹²

While the affective turn convincingly pushes researchers away from concerns about technique and instead towards a researcher’s ethical responsibility to uncovering the relations of power that shape historical inquiry, I would suggest that they remain insufficient as an approach to the archive, primarily because they prioritize an abstract, highly theorized conception of power and subordination at the expense of their lived

⁹¹ David Halperin, “Is there a History of Sexuality?” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale, and Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993); 426.

⁹² Love, *Feeling Backwards*, 51.

dimensions. Affective interventions rest on the assumption that evidentiary claims based in archival work are altogether suspect, *especially* when they purport to explain or interpret the experience of marginalized or oppressed groups. As Joan Scott famously claimed in her essay “The Evidence of Experience,” for example, an overreliance on the archive as the site of “evidence” has turned history into a “foundationalist” discipline that cannot but undercut any researcher’s potential ethical commitment to the past:

When the evidence offered [by historians] is the evidence of “experience,” the claim for referentiality is further buttressed – what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based – that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place.⁹³

Scott thus maintains that historians’ very grounding in the archive – and their unthinking trust in the evidence they find there – leads to a widespread overreliance on “techniques” of interpretation rather than a more widespread questioning of the terms of difference, marginality, and injustice. However, while Scott maintains that scholars should instead shift their focus to a “literary” reading of the past – an argument often cited as a precursor to affective histories like Cvetkovich’s and Love’s – turning away from basic evidentiary claims like those made from the site of the archive tend to evacuate the *actual people* who experience, resist, and subvert relations of authority and subordination. As Clare Hemmings has convincingly written, the move to anti-foundationalist inquiry popular in contemporary queer theory has tended to erase the

⁹³ Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993); 399.

actual lesbian and black women who pushed for greater scholarly attention to difference, marginality, and the categories of social inquiry in the first place. It would seem that the affective turn, then, in rejecting evidentiary claims altogether, both reduces the site of the archive and prioritizes the activity of abstract theorizing over the activities of everyday political actors. An approach that privileges theorists over those they claim to represent, I think, can hardly be called an adequately ethical response to the relations of authority and subordination that shape historical inquiry.

In my effort to reconstruct an era of political theorizing that is already freighted with assumptions and misconceptions by the very theorists who have problematized the archive, then, I have turned to an unusual alternative archive to help me re-center the diverse views, debates, and writers that shaped lesbian feminism in its own moment; in particular, I have turned to the pages of the lesbian feminist magazine *Sinister Wisdom* (*SW*) as an alternative *kind* of archive. *SW*, I argue, represents an effort by lesbian feminists themselves to document the various overlapping and dynamic debates that occurred in lesbian feminism during the period between 1976 (the year in which *SW* published its first issue) and the present. While *SW* is far from the only lesbian feminist magazine (*The Ladder*, for example, circulated from 1955-1970; *Conditions* from 1976-1990; *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* from 1970-1985), its scope was arguably the most capacious. Included in its pages are not only poems, stories, essays, and visual art by lesbian feminist creators, but also a remarkable degree of reflection and self-assessment on the part of the editors and contributors. To name just a few examples of this commitment to self-reflecting on the state of lesbian feminism itself, in just the first four years of its existence *Sinister Wisdom's* editors published the full proceedings of

conference panels on lesbian feminism,⁹⁴ several interviews with the founders and editors of lesbian feminist presses on publishing as an out lesbian,⁹⁵ a survey on the challenges and implications of lesbian separatism,⁹⁶ a set of members' reflections on contemporaneous texts like *Conditions: Five (The Black Women's Issue)*, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*, and regular letter-to-the-editor features which made space for and, often, responded directly to, controversial debates on issues like race and racism, separatism, aesthetics, and political strategy.

In what follows, I will argue that this alternative kind of archive – one that emerges from the process of contemporaneous self-reflection rather than post-hoc selection or affective interpretation – provides more than just deeper historical context for lesbian feminists; instead, it invites contemporary feminist scholars to shift our interpretations the very meaning of landmark texts, thinkers, and ideas of the period. Here is just one example of how reading lesbian feminism through such an alternative archive as *SW* challenges our commonplace assumptions about this era of feminist thought. Most readers of Audre Lorde, an undeniably central figure in lesbian feminist circles, encounter her prose work through the anthology *Sister Outsider*.⁹⁷ Reading Lorde through the lens of an anthology, while it is a way to bring out the resonances across her own work, separates out Lorde's writings from her relationships to other lesbian

⁹⁴ "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978); 4-17.

⁹⁵ "Politics of Publishing," *Sinister Wisdom* 2 (1976); 92-131; "Publishers and Printers: Interviews" and "Alternatives to Print," *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (1980); 71-106.

⁹⁶ Jan Clausen, "The Politics of Publishing," *Sinister Wisdom* 2 (1976); 95-116.

⁹⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984).

feminists in ways that make it possible to forget how deeply she remained in conversation with these other thinkers throughout her life. By contrast, by tracing Lorde's various engagements in an archive like *Sinister Wisdom*, which printed many of her works in conversations with others rather than as discrete works, reveals a different story. Her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," for example, was originally a presentation given at a panel titled "Lesbians and Literature" at the 1977 MLA convention. Far from having emerged from Lorde's status as a political outsider contesting an identitarian and essentialist movement, Lorde gave the talk alongside papers by Julia Penelope Stanley, Mary Daly, Judith McDaniel, and Adrienne Rich – all white lesbians who nonetheless attempt to grapple with the interlocking realities of racism, homophobia, and sexism that thinkers like Lorde pushed them to recognize.⁹⁸

This fact is far more important than simply bearing a tidbit of historical detail. For one, the printed proceedings of the talk in Issue 6 of *SW* (published in 1978) point out that *not only* was the talk part of a larger series on Black (and) lesbian issues at the 1977 MLA convention, but it also sprang from the organizers' engagements with previous conference panels, including one in which Barbara Smith presented her explosive essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and another on lesbian writing that had included

⁹⁸ In her comments, for example, Adrienne Rich writes that "I believe that we must recognize and reclaim an anti-racist female tradition, closely entwined though not identical with feminist tradition. This history has been erased, both by Black and white-Leftist documenters of the Black movement, for whom the only "leaders" (with the token exception of Angela Davis) are men... But the mutual history of Black and white women in this country is a realm so painful and resonant that it has barely been touched by writers either of political 'science' or of imaginative literature. Yet until that silence is broken, that history revealed, we will all be struggling in a state of deprivation and ignorance." *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978); 19.

Lorde and Rich as well as June Jordan⁹⁹ and Honor Moore.¹⁰⁰ Additionally – and perhaps more importantly for understanding the trajectory and substance of Lorde’s own work – reading the proceedings of the MLA panel reveal that it was there that Lorde would have first encountered the argumentation of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, which was not in print until the following year, and which Lorde famously contested in her 1978 “Open Letter.”¹⁰¹ To recognize that Lorde and Daly were in direct conversation with one another (as well as with a much wider network of diverse lesbian feminists) and that they were reading and discussing each other’s work, then, is to reveal a different reality than the one contemporary feminist theorists imagine when they encounter Lorde’s work in an anthology. Read in the context of this archive, Lorde’s work is less an indictment of an exclusionary and essentialist group of white lesbians – or a precursor to the more sophisticated “third wave” of queer theory – than it is an embedded and interested attempt to hold lesbian feminists like Daly accountable to the various members of their public. “The fact that we are here and that I speak now these words,” Lorde argued at the conference, was not an indictment but an appeal to coalition: it was “an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Jordan was a Black, bisexual poet and the author of many volumes of poetry, including *Things That I Do in the Dark: Selected Poetry, 1954-1977* (New York: Random House, 1977).

¹⁰⁰ At the time of the MLA conference, Moore was the author of the play *Mourning Pictures*, which was later performed around the country and on Broadway. (New York: Random House, 1997).

¹⁰¹ Audre Lorde, “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

¹⁰² Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978); 15. See also *Sister Outsider*, 44.

If one challenge of reconstructing lesbian feminism as a form of publicity is a methodological one, then, a second, related challenge of reconstructing a lesbian feminist politics that does not rely on frameworks like the “wave” metaphor is a political-conceptual one. While the ideas that emerged from debates and disputes within lesbian feminism sometimes bear resemblance to the post-structural, postmodern, or queer theories that claim them as antecedents, I will suggest that they were not primarily conceived or developed in relation to these discourses. Instead, I will suggest that these debates emerged as lesbian feminists debated the strategies best suited for a coalitional politics, and as they engaged in concrete projects to establish the internal institutions and conditions necessary to promote coalition-building as a *distinctive form* of publicity. In order to resist the constant risk of evacuating the actual content of this distinctive political praxis – a risk that I have suggested has yet to be fully appreciated, even by feminist historians and theorists who share my concerns – this work attempts to prioritize the rich conceptual content that shaped lesbian feminists’ own sense of publicity over the presumed limitations and failures that we, too often, impose onto this period.

Indeed, the dream of a lesbian feminist public that I argue characterizes much of lesbian political writing in the 1980s sees publicity in terms of the challenges of *coalition*. When we see lesbian feminism as a form of publicity with its own internal institutional and relational requirements, we can ask all sorts of as-yet unexamined questions about relationships *within* the group: when someone speaks “as a lesbian,” who are they speaking to or about? What audience do they expect will respond to their claims? Who has the authority to speak *for* the group, and whose responsibility is it to listen? When members of the group are confronted with differences or conflicts, whose

responsibility is it to *account* for these differences? In a word, what happens when feminist political theorists begin thinking of lesbian feminism as a form of publicity rather than as an appeal to identity, a commitment to essentialism, or a dependency on freighted lenses like experience? None of these questions are quite captured by the wave narrative which, however inadvertently, reinforces the notion that lesbian feminists (and in particular lesbian feminists of color) were somehow less important – or that their ideas somehow less valuable – than *new* ways of thinking about power. Where *identity* thinking sees an “eruption of difference” set in motion by the claims of excluded others, a public, coalitional framework sees ongoing *relationships* of inequality that exist in real, lived institutional contexts. Although these questions, as I will suggest, are the central concerns of feminist theorizing during the 1980s and beyond, their presence – and their importance as distinctly political questions – is constantly at risk of falling out of view. By bringing lesbian feminist approaches to these questions back into view on their own terms, this work will make the case that these approaches are not only qualitatively different from those informed by conceptualizations of publicity put forth by non-feminist political theorists, but also that a specifically lesbian feminist conception of coalition as a distinct form of publicity is, today, as urgently needed as ever. In the work that follows, then, I will argue that thinking of lesbian feminism as a form of publicity transposes these commonplace assumptions about identity, essentialism, and experience to questions, instead, about coalition, accountability, and repair. The relentless effort to keep the latter questions in view is not only a key historical feature of lesbian feminism, but is a positive contribution to the conceptual resources of the field of political theory.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation unfolds in three main parts. First, I will make the case for thinking of lesbian feminism as a form of publicity, suggesting that the widespread view of lesbian politics as reactionary and undemocratic is largely inaccurate. In Chapter 1, “A More Thorough Resistance?” I argue that, while much has been made of queer theory’s engagement in post-structural theories of the subject, these arguments are as much engagements with the central claims of intersectional, Black, and Third World feminisms as they are responses to the work of poststructuralist philosophers. Indeed, situating queer theory in relation to intersectional feminism reveals how deeply and radically queer theory breaks from the political intuitions that animated lesbian feminists (and especially lesbian of color feminists). Where the watchword of the 1980s was “coalition” – a political intuition born of an awareness of the challenges of publicity – queer theorists have instead come to think of *their* adoption of intersectionality as an exemplary political stance, and of queerness itself as standing in for *all* marginalized positions. Unlike intersectional theorists’ emphasis on politics as coalition, I argue, queer theorists see themselves as engaged in an exemplary politics of critique.

I work to tease out the difference between a coalitional and a critical politics by offering a close textual and historical reading of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*. In particular, I contrast Rich’s commitment to acknowledging and accounting for her own racial biases (especially in the 1986 reprint of the text), on the one hand, to the dubious argument, often made in contemporary queer theory, that queer theory performs intersectionality *better* than intersectional theorists themselves. I argue that while queer theorists have argued that the intersectional limitations of second wave texts like Rich’s

evidence the need for queer theory to move *beyond* a merely coalitional politics, Rich's preface to the second edition of the text reflects her ongoing commitment to taking seriously the substantive criticisms and interventions of lesbian feminists of color who challenged her throughout her career. It is this sort of commitment to coalitional thinking, I argue, that characterized much of lesbian feminism during the 1980s. Moreover, though, I conclude the chapter by suggesting that an accountability-based approach to coalition-building is as badly needed in today's queer politics as it was in the 1980s.

In Chapter 2, "The Loving Public," I turn to how conceiving of lesbian feminism as an attempt to call forth a new kind of public changes our understanding both of the political commitments of lesbians themselves and of the kinds of debates that characterized the 1980s. First, I argue that lesbian feminism is related to, but importantly distinct from, existing concepts of the "public sphere," "counterpublics," and "publicity." I argue that political theorists of the "public sphere" have long suggested that a defining feature of public life is the tendency to substitute the views, interests, and desires of a *particular* group for those of 'the' public in general. However, this risk of publicity has fallen out of view in mainstream political theory, becoming eclipsed by concerns about the normative requirements of deliberation, about the terms on which the marginalized should be included into the public sphere, and about the requirements of consensus-building. By contrast, I argue, lesbian feminists were uniquely attuned to the constant risk of substituting *one* perspective (for example, white women's) for concerns of 'the' public, which should instead be conceptualized in terms of the asymmetrical, cross-cutting, and complex relationships between women with diverse perspectives and viewpoints. Highlighting this persistent failure in political theory to account for power in

debates over the public sphere, I suggest, alerts us to the political risks that lesbian feminists faced as they sought to inaugurate a new public; in particular, the risk of foreclosing negotiation between those most authorized to speak for ‘the’ public and those whose voices are marginalized. Far from representing the essentialist, reactionary, and exclusionary identity politics that “third wave” historicizations have imposed on it, many lesbian feminists saw their work as open-ended, process-oriented, and deeply coalitional.

Second, then, I reconstruct the diverse political claims made by lesbian writers and activists by turning to lesbian political archives often overlooked by political theorists, such as the magazine *Sinister Wisdom*. If Chapter 2 makes the case for thinking of lesbian feminism as a public organized around leaving open the possibility for contestation, Chapter 3, “Politics as Sinister Wisdom,” takes up the question of how contestation shaped the substance of lesbian feminist political relationships. In particular, I argue that understanding lesbian feminism as a distinct kind of counterpublic challenges the idea that this was an era of essentialism. Quite the opposite: within the emergent lesbian feminist counterpublic of the 1980s, new forms of political responsibilities emerged as lesbians of color began to call white lesbians to account for the ongoing issues of race and racism. Within institutionalized spaces of contestation like the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*, a specific concept of relational repair emerged as the central political responsibility of any member of the lesbian feminist public. This process of repair unfolds in three steps, in which lesbian feminists first call upon the *promise* of reciprocal accountability implicit in coalitional politics, outline a *breach* in this promise, usually as a result of implicit or explicit racial inequalities, and, finally, call (white) lesbian feminists to *account* for and repair these breaches in their ongoing coalition work.

In Chapter 4, “Lesbian Existence: Seeing from the Oppressed Point of View,” I turn to the life and work of Monique Wittig. Although Wittig occupies a rather fraught position in relation to the lesbian feminism of Americans like Lorde, Moraga, Lugones, and Rich, her work is incredibly useful in thematizing the basic requirements of reparative coalition work. In this chapter, then, I use Wittig to elaborate what it looks like to “see from the oppressed point of view” in order to inaugurate the process of repair. While some have interpreted Wittig’s work as akin to standpoint theories that depend on a problematic conception of “experience,” I argue that a closer reading of Wittig’s historical and intellectual context belies this interpretation. Instead, Wittig engages lesbian feminism *as a public*; that is, she seeks to incite others to resist collapsing the diverse viewpoints and arguments that make up lesbian politics into reductive statements about ‘the’ lesbian feminist public. Wittig’s central contribution to lesbian feminism, I argue, is her development of the term “lesbian existence,” a term she borrows from the work of Adrienne Rich. I suggest that we read Wittig’s emphasis on the impossibility of lesbians existence historically, politically, and discursively as the impossibility of articulating lesbians as political subjects in their own right. In other words, Wittig diagnoses in lesbian struggles a *reduction* of the critical options available to theorists and political actors alike. In response, Wittig pushes us to recognize how this reduction insidiously seeps into feminist thinking and presents yet another challenge to the kinds of coalitional responsibility and repair that are central to lesbian feminist publicity.

Finally, I argue that while the political challenges posed by lesbians have historically been considered less sophisticated than queer theories, the lesbian conception of accountability is a point of contact with contemporary theories of grounded

responsibility. In Chapter 5, “‘Our Reality is the Fictional:’ Wittig, Lorde, and the Lesbian Body Politic,” I put Wittig’s work back into conversation with Audre Lorde in order to show that they share a utopian vision of the kinds of transformations that might take place if the project of “loving other women” were to become conditions of political life. I theorize Wittig and Lorde as “vanishing mediators;” that is as figures that are continually cited as having motivated a historical change, even as the political substance of their work is excised from the present. Both Wittig and Lorde pose a problem for queer theory, I argue, because they seem at once to signal a methodological affinity with post-structuralism while hewing strongly to “outdated” concepts such as identity, recognition, and the speaking subject. For many queer theorists, then, Wittig and Lorde are, quite simply, *imperfect* antecedents – vanishing mediators – subject to correction and supersession by queer theorists themselves.

I argue that we should resist the urge to do allow thinkers like Wittig and Lorde – and, indeed, lesbian feminists more generally – to remain vanishing mediators, and that we should instead understand them as identifying a very *particular* kind of injustice distinct from queer theory. For both writers, the harms of racism and homophobia tend not *only* to be the direct effects of inequality, like exclusion from full citizenship or economic oppression. While these may very well be at work, Wittig and Lorde identify an *additional* dimension of oppression: the presence of structured patterns of misrecognition that make it impossible to call the social body to account. Their work, then, represents more than an attachment to the stability of agents and subjects: the goal is to create a kind of public in which marginalized people are no longer required to translate themselves in order to be heard by the powerful and can, instead, be heard *in*

their own terms. For these writers, then, we might say that the capacity to speak in their own terms is a *condition* of the coalitional public they want to inaugurate. I close the chapter by making the case that these concerns bear striking resemblance to the transformative political projects of Indigenous decolonization and racial reparations in the U.S., suggesting contemporary avenues for lesbian feminist coalition-building. I conclude this work by expanding briefly on the politically transformative dimensions of lesbian feminism and by reflecting on intersectional and coalitional directions for lesbian feminist conceptions of accountability and repair in the present moment.

“When a people transform a world that is never parochial; it is the other world that must question its ways. Our concept of an archives must be different; we are different. But difference is not invisibility; it is presence in our own land.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Joan Nestle and Jim Monahan, “Conversation about Gay and Lesbian Archives,” *The Gay Insurgent* (1978).

Chapter 1

“A More Thorough Resistance”?

Coalition, Critique, and the Intersectional Promise of Queer Theory

*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
From where does your strength come?*

I think somehow, somewhere
every poem of mine must repeat those

questions

which are not the same.

- Adrienne Rich¹⁰⁴

Introduction

When Gayle Rubin wrote in 1984 that “the time has come to think about sex,”¹⁰⁵ she inaugurated a distinctive relationship between the academic study of sexuality and a political commitment to democratic redress. Today, Rubin’s is a view that is increasingly taken for granted among queer theorists: written in response to anti-pornography feminists who Rubin argued “[recreated] a very conservative sexual morality” and had “claimed to speak for all feminism,” the essay makes the now-familiar claim that to commit to the study of sexuality is to oppose to any and all “hierarchical [systems] of sexual value.”¹⁰⁶ If anti-pornography feminism had begun making undemocratic, normative judgments about “good” and “bad” sex, she reasons, then resisting the ways that certain practices are policed by conservative discourses might open up space for non-normative sexual subjects – especially those constrained by racial, classed, geographic, or

¹⁰⁴ From the poem “Sources,” in *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Rubin, Gayle, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,’ in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

other sexualized norms – to contest the terms of their marginalization. For Rubin, a more democratic sexual politics – a “theoretical as well as sexual pluralism”¹⁰⁷ – was thus to be a thoroughly anti-normative one: it was a politics that promised nothing less than to undo the compulsory, or normative, categories in which the left defined collective political action.

Since ‘Thinking Sex’ appeared, analyses like Rubin’s – arguments that critique undemocratic discourses that marginalize non-normative subjects – have increasingly become a starting point rather than a conclusion for queer theorists.¹⁰⁸ In this chapter, I seek to re-contextualize this theoretical move, arguing that queer theorists’ emphasis on anti-normativity as the central site of political struggle is a response to and a reflection of the analytic and political contributions of intersectional theorists, whose ideas emerged from the lesbian feminist movement in the 1980s. The term, rooted in the political claims of Black, lesbian, and Third World feminists in the US, denotes the idea that the overlapping forces of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of inequality are “greater than the sum of their parts.”¹⁰⁹ Broadly conceived, it identifies “the instantiations of marginalization that [operate] within institutionalized discourses and that [legitimize] existing power relations” and reveals “how discourses of resistance (e.g. feminism and antiracism) could themselves function as sites that [produce and legitimize]

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 309.

¹⁰⁸ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, vol. 8 (1989): 140.

marginalization.”¹¹⁰ Although many theorists have conceived of intersectionality and queer theory as fundamentally “autonomous” political projects,¹¹¹ I will argue in the following pages that, in fact, the key premises of intersectional thinking have both historically motivated and conceptually legitimized the central claims of queer theorizing. At its core, for example, intersectionality helps to explain what Rubin calls “normative discourses” – namely, the process by which closed categories like “good” and “bad” sex enable conservative practices that marginalize certain subjects. It also points to the fact that marginalization can take place within purportedly liberatory groups like radical feminism, and insists that academics and activists alike attend to these complex internal relationships. To take an anti-normative stance like Rubin’s, is, at best, to open oneself to the insights of intersectionality; it is to notice how racial, sexual, classed, and other inequalities within feminist discourse enable the marginalization of certain subjects deemed “deviant,” and to consciously resist these premises.

Yet if claims like Rubin’s – and, as I shall argue below, calls for anti-normative politics in queer theory more generally – depend on intersectional thinking, why is it that so many intersectional feminists rooted in Black (and) lesbian feminism remain skeptical of queer theory? From Cathy Cohen, who argues that queer theory has left intact many of the “ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects,”¹¹² to Barbara Smith, who wrote that “today’s ‘queer’ politicians seem to operate

¹¹⁰ Devon W. Carbado, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson, “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory,” *Du Bois Review* 10, vol. 2 (2013): 304.

¹¹¹ Kevin Duong, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality?” *Politics & Gender* 8, vol. 3 (2012): 370-386.

¹¹² Cohen, Cathy J., “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ* Vol. 3 (1997): 438.

in a historical and ideological vacuum,”¹¹³ some of the most vocal critics of queer politics have been the architects of the very intuition from which queer theory takes its cue. In what follows, I argue that this apparent contradiction has to do with the ways that queer theory has drifted away from the key *political* dimension of intersectional thinking, even as it commits itself to the interpretive lessons intersectionality has offered to critical theorists.

This chapter’s key claim – that revisiting the history of *lesbian* feminism reveals a more capacious and directly political understanding of intersectionality than the one on offer by queer theorists – is a response to critiques of queer anti-normativity from intersectional scholars like Cohen and Smith, as well as to a growing suspicion about the inherently democratic promise of anti-normativity from queer theorists themselves. In a recent special edition of the journal *differences*, for instance, editors Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson mark a new agenda for queer theory, arguing that queer theory can and should “proceed without a primary commitment to antinormativity.”¹¹⁴ If, as I shall argue below, queer theory’s commitment to anti-normativity has emerged from its fraught engagement with intersectionality and its eschewal of lesbian feminism, then Wiegman and Wilson’s provocation points to questions that are broader still: how might we (re)evaluate queer theory’s response to the intersectional lessons of lesbian feminism in the 1980s? Does queer theory deliver on the intersectional promise that it extends? And

¹¹³ Smith, Barbara, “Queer Politics: Where’s the Revolution?” *The Nation* 257, vol. 1 (July 5, 1993): 13.

¹¹⁴ Wiegman, Robyn and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Anti-Normativity’s Queer Conventions,” in *differences* 26, vol. 1 (2015): 1.

finally, if it does not, upon what resources might a renewed queer commitment to intersectional thinking in the twenty-first century draw?

I will probe these questions in three parts. First, I argue for an expanded conception of “intersectionality” to include work that is typically glossed as Black, Third World, and lesbian feminism. Doing so reveals the deep entanglements between intersectionality’s key claims about intra-group marginalization, on the one hand, and the broader field of critical theory, on the other. This expanded conception of intersectionality, I argue, reveals that it emerges from the *sine qua non* of critical theory: the insight that power is organized recursively. By this, I mean that critical theorists, broadly speaking, share the insight that hierarchies both *produce and police* the very marginal subjects they take as their premises. More than just a temporal process wherein oppressive logics like colonialism or racism appear over time as “reverberations with a difference,”¹¹⁵ I argue that recursivity describes a concrete “relation of ruling”¹¹⁶ which must *produce* the very marginal subjects whose punishment, in turn, legitimizes various exercises of power.¹¹⁷ For intersectional theorists such as Barbara Smith, Cathy Cohen, Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, and others, power operates by generating marginal subjects – for example, Black women – who must be disciplined in order to retroactively legitimize the (white) nuclear family. Because this recursive process is often left

¹¹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, “On Recursive Histories: Beyond Rupture and Continuity” *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹¹⁶ I owe the term “relations of ruling” to Dorothy Smith in *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

¹¹⁷ I borrow this understanding of the term “recursivity” from Robert Nichols, who has used the term to denote how, in the context of settler colonialism, dispossession is “a kind of bootstrapping procedure that *generates* legal possession out of avowedly extra-legal seizures.” Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession,” in *Political Theory*, 46, vol 1 (2018): 20.

uninterrogated, intersectional scholars have argued that these marginal positions doggedly persist even in purportedly emancipatory projects, such as in feminist critiques of the nuclear family.

In part two, I argue that queer theorists have used the central insights of intersectionality to motivate and legitimize their own critical interventions in two ways. First, queer theorists have suggested that intersectionality evidences the need for new ways of contesting power by drawing attention to the recursive production of marginalized – or non-normative – subjects. Second, drawing on the intersectional argument that recursive power can be at work *within* purportedly emancipatory movements, queer theorists have sought to broaden intersectionality’s political claims to develop a “more thorough” resistance to marginality: queerness, they argue, is an *exemplary* resistance to being “resubordinated to a unity that caricatures, demeans, and domesticates difference.”¹¹⁸ However, this conception of marginality as an exemplary site of democratic resistance strains against the coalitional bent of intersectionality. Thus, despite the fact that responding to the recursive insight of intersectionality was, and remains, a motivating impulse in queer theory, the field has largely tended to view power as working in decontextualized, abstract, or metatheoretical ways. As a result, queer theory has largely departed from intersectional focus on coalition work, instead reconceiving of democratic redress in terms of anti-normative critique.

Finally, I argue that queer theory’s tendency to privilege democracy-as-critique over democracy-as-coalition has displaced a key site of intersectional coalition-building: the nuclear family. In particular, I suggest that in addition to paradoxically claiming

¹¹⁸ Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *The New Left Review* (January-February 1998): 44.

intersectionality even as they purport to transcend or supersede it, queer theorists' attempts to incorporate intersectional insights have also cased feminists and queer theorists alike to eschew, minimize, or otherwise ignore the deep entanglements between intersectional thinking and lesbian feminism. In order to make this case, I turn to the work of Adrienne Rich to show how (white) lesbian feminism is more deeply connected to the insights of intersectional thinking than is queer theory, even as it sometimes fails to live up to its coalitional promise. Attention to second wave theorizations of the family such as those found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" reveals a distinctive paradox for anti-normative theorists responding to intersectional scholarship. On the one hand, Rich certainly falls victim to what many intersectional scholars might call "cultural" or "white" feminism, often presuming that white women's experiences of family life are the model on which an analysis of all women's oppression should be built. On the other, however, Rich presumes neither that women are exemplary democratic subjects nor that revolutionizing the family can begin and end with the activity of critiquing normative gender roles. In this way, her analysis shares several key insights with the case for intersectional scholarship, even as it fails to produce a fully realized analysis of intersectional power. Such a paradox, which highlights the ambivalent nature of coalitional responsibility, reveals the ongoing importance of intersectional coalition work as a democratic resource.

Intersectionality and the Insight of Recursive Power

Before directly engaging the relationship between intersectionality and queer theory that animates my argument, let me say something about how I am using the term

“intersectionality” itself. While the term first appears in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,”¹¹⁹ my aim is to situate the concept in a much broader conversation in the field of critical theory that includes, among other things, earlier debates in Black feminism. Indeed, while Crenshaw is often credited with having “exposed” the problems of racial and sexual marginalization within feminist politics,¹²⁰ she was hardly the first to notice that many political frameworks tend to produce marginal subjects whose experiences and political claims are silenced, misrecognized, or discredited. Crenshaw opens “Demarginalizing” by invoking *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*;¹²¹ throughout the piece, she develops her insights with reference to works by bell hooks, Barbara and Beverly Smith, Gloria Hull, Paula Giddings, and other Black feminists active throughout the 1980s. Thus, although contemporary proponents of intersectionality argue that the term circulates in contexts that exceed the project of Black feminism,¹²² in the pages that follow, I will refer to “intersectionality” to denote an understanding of the term as situated in the Black feminist politics of the 1980s – one that locates the concept in a set of historical debates over intra-group power and that highlights its conceptual entanglements to prominent Black feminist arguments.¹²³ I do so not to displace

¹¹⁹ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”

¹²⁰ Indeed, this language even appears in attempts to establish intersectionality as a “work-in-progress” that functions “as a condition of possibility for agents to move [the term] to other social contexts and group formations,” as Carbado et al. seek to do.

¹²¹ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

¹²² See, for example, Carbado et al.

¹²³ Indeed, Carbado et al. note that although intersectionality has “traveled” into many new areas and disciplines, “the generative power of the continued interrogation of Black women’s experiences both domestically and internationally is far from exhausted.” 305.

Crenshaw's important work, but to capture some of the dynamic resonances it has with the widespread analysis of intra-group power that proliferated throughout the 1980s. As I will argue in the following sections, it is this broader conversation that both motivated and legitimized queer theory's central theoretical moves.

The notion of intersectionality as I understand it, then, is an intervention into a series of longstanding debates over how theorists and political actors should best understand relations of power, domination, and marginalization. Although intersectional theorists have developed an approach to understanding power that differs in important ways from other theories in the Marxist, Foucaultian, or queer traditions, it is conceptually and politically related to this broader family of scholarship, which I am here calling critical theory. As its practitioners often note, critical theory is best understood genealogically, which is to say that it does not represent some unitary way of understanding the world, but is rather "fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."¹²⁴ What unites its practitioners, then, is something of a "family resemblance:" the common intuition that power, wherever it emerges, is neither as natural nor as straightforward as it appears. Whether understood through the optic of money (Marx), morals (Nietzsche), symptoms (Freud), ideology (Althusser), or disciplining institutions (Foucault), the circulation of power is understood in critical theory to *generate* the very marginal subjects that it disciplines. For critical theorists, analyzing power thus means looking past its alibis, and training the eye, instead, on how dominant classed, racial, or gendered hierarchies generate the very relations of ruling they presume.

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 78.

An emphasis on this self-referential dynamic – the *recursivity* of power – cuts across the several dimensions of critical scholarship with which this article engages. The recursivity of power, for instance, was Marx’s key insight in *The German Ideology*: for Marx, the definitive mark of a “ruling class” is its capacity to generate the very social relations that legitimize and reproduce its dominance. Marx argues that although the “ideas of the ruling class” reflect only a limited point of view, the dominant classes retroactively install them as governing categories by speaking transparently for “the people.” To understand power, then, one must resist the ruse: the critical theorist, argues Marx, need not “look for a category, but [must remain] constantly on the real *ground* of history... not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history.”¹²⁵ For Marx, however, to notice that power produces invested categories of ruling is not simply to reverse the causal relationship between relations of power and their legitimizing discourses – it is not to argue, for instance, simply that practices exist prior to discourses. Rather, it is to notice the how hierarchies central to a form of ruling co-constitute normative and institutional exercises of power. In *The German Ideology* as elsewhere, for instance, Marx shows that capitalist hierarchies *generated* new relations of ruling through money and private property, which in turn become new units of political control. To understand power as recursive is thus to grasp the self-referential relationship between existing hierarchies and the relations of ruling they generate.

Recursive theory, at its best, points to the need for highly contextual analyses of power – those that not only theorize about power in the abstract, but which emphasize the

¹²⁵ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 164. Emphasis original.

ways that power is self-referentially legitimized and deployed in concrete institutional, political, or economic contexts to marginalize certain subjects. Indeed, if Marx developed his insight in the context of the 19th century factory, theorists from a variety of political and intellectual positions have advanced recursive accounts of power in other paradigmatic contexts, including the prison, the colony, and – most importantly for my purposes here – the family. Foucault, for example, describes just such a recursive function of power as it emerged in the bourgeois family; indeed, his primary project is to redirect critical energy away from a conception of the family as a “repressive” institution towards one that interprets the family as site of recursive power. A repressive interpretation of power, Foucault writes, would hold that “The legitimate and procreative couple... imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy.”¹²⁶ For Foucault, interpreting the family as a repressive site in securing power relations fails to understand how sexual hierarchies *generate* various notions of normative sexuality in order to govern or discipline them. It is no accident of history, Foucault insists, that alongside the consolidation of the bourgeois family there emerged “a whole perverse outbreak... of the sexual instinct.”¹²⁷ Rather, he writes that the “implantation of perversions is an instrument effect” of the regulation of sexual hierarchies, a “proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power; an optimization of the power to which each of these local sexualities gave a surface of intervention.”¹²⁸ In other words, it is in the *contextual*

¹²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1978), 3.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 47.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 48.

interaction between existing hierarchies (for example, sexual hierarchies), legitimizing or normative discourses (medicine, psychiatry, the police), and disciplining institutions (the heterosexual family) in which specific relations of ruling emerge. In short, Foucault argues that the conjugal family is a nodal site which not only produces “deviant” sexual subjects, but also enables a proliferation of institutions to manage and discipline a wide array of sexual activities.

Like Foucault, intersectional theorists analyzing the heterosexual family have emphasized its recursive dimensions. Consider, for example, Hortense Spillers’ invocation of the name “Sapphire” to denote Black women’s marginality in the powerful opening sentences of ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe:’ “I describe a locus of confounded identities,” she writes, “a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. *My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.*”¹²⁹ Spillers’ point, of course, is that common conceptions of Black women in popular culture, political ideology, and institutionalized public policy *have* been recursively invented and governed. Throughout, Spillers details the ways in which sexual hierarchies, in the specific context of American enslavement, generated “Sapphire” – the “mocking double” of Black women – in order to legitimize the economic and political supremacy of the white nuclear family, on the one hand, and to justify the brutal treatment of Black women under slavery, on the other. Put simply, the emergence of new, sexualized institutions of white supremacy *depended on* – emerged in recursive relation

¹²⁹ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, 17, vol. 2 (1987): 65. Emphasis mine.

with – disciplinary practices designed to brutalize and degrade marginalized Black women.

Spillers’ work – and, in particular, her conception of the family as an institution that invents the “Black woman” only to “ungender” and discipline her – is only one example of this kind of argument in intersectionality. bell hooks, for example, shows in excruciating detail how the racial marginalization is imprinted on the family structure, both generating racist myths about Black women and, simultaneously, deploying these discourses to elevate the “legitimate” white family.¹³⁰ Similarly, other intersectional scholars have shown how “Black womanhood” is simultaneously invented and punished through discourses about the family in order to legitimize new relationships of racial control. As Cathy Cohen points out,

it was not the promotion of marriage or heterosexuality *per se* that served as the standard or motivation of most slave societies. Instead, marriage and heterosexuality, as viewed through the lenses of profit and domination, and the ideology of white supremacy, were reconfigured to justify the exploitation and regulation of black bodies, even those presumably engaged in heterosexual behavior...¹³¹

As Cohen elaborates, it is not just the *productive* dimension of power – its ability to generate post-hoc legitimizing grounds for hierarchical subject-positions – that is at stake in understanding the raced and gendered dimensions of the family. These presumed grounds, in turn, generate new relations of ruling that systematically marginalize certain

¹³⁰ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

¹³¹ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ*, Vol. 3 (1997): 454.

groups, legitimizing the “underprotection and overpolicing” of women of color.¹³²

Importantly, if hooks, Cohen, and others detail how the heterosexual family became a political institution designed to both manage emergent discourses about normative (white) sexuality and surveil non-normative (Black) sexuality, they also maintain that these meanings were co-articulated through highly contextual institutional mechanisms of control such as miscegenation laws, housing and employment codes, policing, and welfare reform.

Recursivity and the Conditions of Democracy

I spend so much time emphasizing critical theory’s use of recursivity as a shared analytic insight across theories of power because, as I will argue for the remainder of this article, it is the ground on which critical theorists’ claims about democratic politics are built. Indeed, if the insight of recursivity is the backdrop against which a critical family resemblance has emerged, its political importance should be understood in the larger context of critical theory’s distinctive claims about democratic transformation. Unlike liberal or multicultural claims to democracy, which emphasize a broadening of the existing norms and institutions to include more voices, *critical* claims to democracy hold that because hierarchies generate the very relations of rule that reproduce them, expanding these relations to ‘include’ the voices of the oppressed can do little more than misrecognize calls for redress.¹³³ Drawing on the insight of recursivity, critical theorists

¹³² Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, “From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control,” *UCLA Law Review* 1418 (2012): 1419-1472.

¹³³ Ex. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

argue that the very *premises* of politics are often symptoms of hierarchical relationships, and that a more democratic politics – one that can redress a wider set of claims about injustice – would be one that refuses to participate in any discourse that produces and polices marginalized, or non-normative, subjects. Such a democratic politics premised in recursive thinking would require a foundational shift in the very relations of ruling that constrain political imagination.

Intersectional thinking, in particular, illuminates the ways in which Black women are recursively produced and policed as marginalized subjects, and calls for the end of any “relation of ruling” – such as the white nuclear family – that participates in this recursive process. One consequence of this way of thinking has been to notice how these discourses have been inadvertently picked up, deployed, and reinforced by purportedly emancipatory movements that fail to adequately grasp the recursivity of power. Crenshaw, for instance, points out not only that Black women are marginalized by recursive forms of power that both produce and police them, but also that feminist and antiracist organizations have inadequately grasped this problem as a recursive one, thus re-marginalizing women of color in their struggles against gendered and racial violences. Crenshaw describes this failure as one that inadequately apprehends “how the production of images of women of color and the contestations over those images tend to ignore the intersectional interests of women of color;” an adequate political response, then, must therefore *at minimum* grasp both how recursive power produces Black women as

marginal subjects *and* refuse any discursive framework that participates in the production and denigration of these marginal figures.¹³⁴

In other words, any shift in the relations of ruling that marginalize Black women can only be considered *democratic* when the new forms of political engagement they generate actively work against the re-subordination of this marginalized group. This refusal, for intersectional theorists, must be a polyvalent one: intersectional scholarship points to a variety of contexts in which Black women have been re-inscribed in hierarchical relations, including in the racial and sexual division of labor (Spillers), in legal discourses concerning domestic violence and discrimination (Crenshaw), in movement politics that privilege white women's voices over Black women's (hooks), in geographies of racial segregation (Collins), and in the public policies that surveil Black women's sexual practices (Cohen) – just to name a few. Because intersectional thinkers hold that *no particular* site of power is definitive but rather interacts with existing hierarchies in highly contextual ways, these thinkers also argue that theorists cannot “define” power in the abstract, nor can they predict how power might emerge to resubordinate the marginalized in the future. To make a transformative politics democratic, then, theorists and political actors alike must remain vigilant about the sites and contexts in which re-subordination might occur, including in the very forms of political engagement they propose.

Thinking back to Gayle Rubin's “Thinking Sex,” clear resonances between the democratic ambitions of queer anti-normative and intersectional scholarship are apparent.

¹³⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *The Stanford Law Review* 43, vol 6 (1991): 1283.

Rubin, like intersectional scholars, insists both that sexuality is “constituted in society and history” and that sexual hierarchies produce marginalized sexual identities and mechanisms of sexual control. For Rubin, marginal sexual subjects – fetishists, sadomasochists, homosexuals, and trans people, to name a few – are *invented* as legitimizing grounds for distinguishing between good and bad sex and as justifications for new forms of sexual surveillance and control; in this way, they are analogous to other marginal figures like “Sapphire” in Spillers’ analysis of the family. Moreover, we might read Rubin’s invocation of “benign sexual variation” as an attempt to capture something of intersectionality’s emphasis on the refusal to re-marginalize the most vulnerable: “One need not like or perform a particular sex act in order to recognize that someone else will,” Rubin writes, “and that this difference does not indicate a lack of good taste, mental health, or intelligence in either party.”¹³⁵ In short, Rubin seems to echo the intersectional notion that it is the recognition of the irreducible multiplicity of marginalities that makes possible a more democratic sexual politics.

Rubin, of course, is not the only scholar of sexual politics to draw from the insights of intersectional thinking. In fact, locating intersectionality genealogically within the broader context of critical theory reveals that the rethinking of “Gay and Lesbian” studies – a rethinking that would result in the emergence of queer theory¹³⁶ – took its cue from many of the intersectional insights about recursive power and intra-group marginalization noted above. Steven Seidman, for instance, wrote in his contribution to *Fear of a Queer Planet* that

¹³⁵ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 269.

¹³⁶ Theresa de Lauretis, “Introduction to Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” *differences* 3, vol. 2 (1991): iii.

...postmodern strains in gay thinking and politics have their immediate social origin in recent developments in the gay culture. In the reaction by people of color, third-world-identified gays, poor and working class gays, and sex rebels to the ethnic/essentialist model of identity and community that achieved dominance in the lesbian and gay cultures of the 1970s, I locate the social basis for a [queer] rethinking of identity and politics.¹³⁷

Here, Seidman points out that the “eruption of difference”¹³⁸ within lesbian and gay movements in the 1980s – and, with it, the growing awareness that these movements participate in the recursive discourses that produce and police marginalized subjects – both motivates and justifies queer theoretical interventions. And Seidman is hardly alone in making this case. Shane Phelan, too, locates her turn towards postmodern theories of the subject in the claims of the Combahee River Collective. Phelan writes that “the refusal to subsume one movement into another” – a refusal that for her animates both the Combahee statement and subsequent turns towards “queer” thinking – “offered greater possibilities for common action than an imperialist agenda resting on a binary opposition [between lesbians and straight women].”¹³⁹ Teresa de Lauretis, in her introduction to the special issue of *differences* in which the words “queer theory” first appear, argues that it is in its commitment to making possible the multiple, overlapping, and as-yet unseen differences between and among women that “queer” departs from “lesbian and gay studies.” “‘Queer Theory,’ she writes, “was arrived at in the effort to avoid all these fine [racial, gendered] distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the

¹³⁷ Steven Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 106.

¹³⁸ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

¹³⁹ Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), x.

given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, even contemporary queer theorists situate and justify their interventions by appealing to the language of intersectionality: as C. Heike Schotten puts it, queer projects appeal as often to Cathy Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” to elaborate their resistances to re-subordination as they do to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, or Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “Sex in Public.”¹⁴¹

What’s curious, however, is that in citing the work of intersectional theorists as having *motivated* queer theoretical interventions, queer theorists increasingly tend to do so by marking out the supposed failures of *both* “gay and lesbian studies” *and* intersectionality as transformative, liberatory, or “world-making” projects. Kevin Duong, for instance, argues that while intersectionality attempts to combat “many feminists’ past and present tendency to reduce to a singular, privileged rubric the multiplicity of an individuals’ identity, such as privileging gender at the expense of racial identity,”¹⁴² intersectional thinking has largely failed to live up to these promises by remaining attached to a politics of visibility and a too-stable conception of group identity. By contrast, Duong suggests that queer theory takes up intersectionality’s recursive analysis and carries it further: “One of queer theory’s lessons for intersectional research,” he writes, is its insistence that “if we feminists want to respond adequately to the political problems that our intersectional research seeks to overcome, then we need to go *beyond*

¹⁴⁰ Lauretis, “Introduction,” v.

¹⁴¹¹⁴¹ C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁴² Duong, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality?” 372-373.

the paradigms hitherto employed.”¹⁴³ While intersectional frames open up the *possibility* of conceiving of a politics that refuses the re-subordination of marginal subjects, he seems to suggest, they need queer theory to embody and carry out this politics. In making this case, Duong shares a perspective with many other prominent queer theorists, including Jasbir Puar, who argues that intersectionality remains trapped in the logic of identity,¹⁴⁴ and Schotten, who suggests that where intersectional frameworks point towards a continual awareness of the co-constitution of different axes of oppression, *queer* frameworks thematize and exemplify this vigilance. Queer theory, in other words, not only tells us something about the modes of power in which queer subjects are produced and policed (as in the recursive account of power I gave above), but also exceeds and transcends intersectionality by serving the more *exemplary* purpose of “[queering] the revolutionary project itself.”¹⁴⁵

If queer theorists’ main claim to democratic politics rests on the claim that anti-normativity does intersectional thinking *better* than intersectionality itself, however, it is striking that intersectional theorists, in large part, have been highly critical of this move. Cathy Cohen and Barbara Smith have argued that radical queer theory has largely failed to promote solidarity amongst marginalized people. Here, for example, is Barbara Smith in *The Nation*:

Unlike the early lesbian and gay movement... today’s “queer” politicians seem to operate in a historical and ideological vacuum. “Queer” activists focus on “queer” issues, and racism, sexual oppression and economic exploitation do not qualify,

¹⁴³ Ibid., 381-383.

¹⁴⁴ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁵ Schotten, *Queer Terror*, 95.

despite the fact that the majority of “queers” are people of color, female or working class.”¹⁴⁶

If queer theory is an engagement with the insights of intersectionality – namely, that transforming the grounds of politics must occur in ways that do not re-subordinate the most marginalized – why have intersectional theorists been so vocally critical of queer theory’s political vision? I would argue that what distinguishes intersectional theorists’ emphasis on coalition from the more general project of political transformation that underwrites much of critical theory – indeed, the distinction on which the rest of this article will turn – is intersectional theorists’ insistence that *critiquing* recursive dimensions of power from a marginal position is not coterminous with a *coalitional* political practice.

Indeed, intersectional thinkers have often argued that democratic politics do not emerge easily from an abstract commitment to marginality; they have not – indeed, cannot – occur seamlessly from a recognition of collective marginal subjects such as the proletariat, the woman, the colonized, or even the queer. They hold that no theoretical framework – even an intersectional one – will inevitably lead to more democratic politics. Smith argues, for example, that the dangers of queer theory lie in conflating one’s marginal position in relation to power with a conscious political commitment to coalition work:

homosexuality embodies an innately radical critique of the traditional nuclear family, whose political function has been to constrict the sexual expression and gender roles of all of its members, especially women, lesbians, and gays. Being in structural opposition to the status quo because of one’s identity, however, is quite different from being consciously and actively opposed to the status quo because one is a radical and understands how the system works.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Barbara Smith, “Queer Politics: Where’s the Revolution?,” 13.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

Cohen, too, argues that engaging in intersectional theory that identifies the complexities of recursive power should lead critical theorists to be wary of claims that conflate marginality with a shared political commitment:

in recognizing the distinct history of oppression lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people have confronted and challenged, I am not willing to embrace every queer as my marginalized political ally. In the same way, I do not assume that shared racial, gender, and/or class position or identity guarantees or produces similar political commitments.¹⁴⁸

To the extent that critical theory identifies the recursive dimensions of power – that is, the ways in which it functions by producing and policing marginalized subjects – Cohen argues that various marginalized people might share structural positions in relation to power. But while understanding the shared marginality of such positions is the *condition* for a politics of coalition, Cohen also argues that democratic coalitions will need to remain vigilant in order not to conflate the structural location of marginalized subjects with a liberatory politics *par excellence*. Translating the contextual insights of recursivity into politics instead requires the ability to realize, as Bernice Johnson Reagon puts it, that “everybody ain’t your company,” but that engaging in democratic struggle can nonetheless “teach you how to cross cultures and not kill yourself.”¹⁴⁹

I want to suggest, following thinkers like Smith and Cohen, that the apparent distance between queer theory’s intersectional motivations and its actual anti-normative politics emerges in its practitioners’ conflation of queer people’s structural position in relation to recursive power – a feature of critique – with the political practice of coalition-

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 458-459.

¹⁴⁹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Turning the Century: Coalition Politics,” *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 362-363.

building. This conflation has effected a radical decontextualization of the insight of recursivity, such that queer politics appears as an *exemplary* democratic praxis rather than a situated political practice within particular relations of ruling. This decontextualization strains against intersectionality's two main insights about democratic politics: that power recursively produces and punishes certain marginalized subjects in specific institutional settings, on the one hand, and that these subjects are nevertheless not guaranteed to be liberatory figures, on the other.

"A More Thorough Resistance"

Let me proceed by way of an example. In her 1998 essay "Merely Cultural," Judith Butler succinctly spells out her defense of queer politics through an extended reading of feminist engagements with the family.¹⁵⁰ At the outset, Butler shares in what I have argued is critical theorists' commitment to a recursive analysis of power, focusing on how gender hierarchies simultaneously produce and marginalize certain non-normative subjects. Citing feminist arguments during the 1970s and 80s, Butler argues that the family is a political site in which sexual hierarchies work together to generate both a normative discourse – compulsory heterosexuality – and a set of institutional practices – "a specific operation of the sexual and gendered distribution of legal and economic entitlements."¹⁵¹ For Butler, as for the critical theorists above, heterosexuality and the entitlements it entails are generated by a need to retroactively legitimize the family as a concrete relation of ruling. In other words, Butler's view is that the family is,

¹⁵⁰ Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," in *The New Left Review* (January-February 1998), 38.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

ultimately, a *recursive* institution: its hierarchical dimensions are only reproduced to the extent that it generates “heterosexual persons, fit for entry into the family as social form.”¹⁵²

At the same time as the family produces a concrete set of relations of ruling, Butler argues, it also must produce a series of marginal subject positions that are *not* fit for entry into the family – those who, by definition, will occupy marginal positions in the social order secured by the normative family. Again, like Spillers’ “Sapphire” and Rubin’s fetishists, these marginal subjects are what give the lie to the family’s legitimizing grounds, and therefore open up the possibility of radically altering the exclusionary terrain in which sexual politics has been circumscribed. Thus, understanding the family as a site of sexual hierarchy – the political task she assigns to queer theory – reveals that the family, a “specific arrangement of kin,” is “historically contingent and, in principle, transformable.”¹⁵³ In short, the transformative promise of queer theory is its ability “to argue that what qualifies as a person and a sex will be radically altered.”¹⁵⁴

Thus far, Butler’s argument about how queers “confound” the self-referential relationship between the norms and practices of the nuclear family echoes the call for coalitional practices central to intersectional theories. However, Butler’s essay deploys this critique to make a broader point still. The essay, in addition to analyzing the nuclear family as a recursive institution, is an attempt to parry criticisms of queer politics for occupying a “merely cultural” space and for offering an analysis of power that is irreducibly distinct from economic or material concerns. Writing against such criticisms

¹⁵² Ibid., 40.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

of queer politics, Butler seeks to defend the importance of queer marginality by arguing that the marginal position of queers “[confirms] the place of sexual regulation as a mode of producing the subject”¹⁵⁵ – an argument that is less about the highly contextual operation of power than it is about defending queer marginalization as a *paradigmatic* site of political struggle.

The importance of this distinction, though it emerges in defense of the worthy cause of including queer struggles in the agenda of critical theory, should not be underestimated. In defending the importance of redressing queer marginality, Butler diverges dramatically from the coalitional claims of intersectional theory, however much her preceding analysis of the family has echoed its critique of recursive power. In Butler’s essay, the figure of the queer, as that which confounds the recursive naturalization of the family, not only gives the lie to a *particular* hierarchy that restricts sexuality in the historically specific configuration of the family. Here, it becomes synecdoche for the process by which power *in general* marginalizes non-normative subjects under the false sign of unity. For Butler, the queer is not only a marginalized subject whose subordination takes place in the localized context of the family, but represents a broader “refusal to become resubordinated to a unity that caricatures, demeans, and domesticates difference.”¹⁵⁶ If the queer confounds the family by refusing to be “fit for entry into the normative family,” it is this refusal that for Butler “becomes the basis for a *more expansive and dynamic political impulse*.”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, she writes, “this resistance to ‘unity’” – the lesson of the queer – “carries with it the cipher of democratic

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 44. Emphasis mine.

promise on the Left.”¹⁵⁸ At the same time that Butler invokes the intersectional insight that marginality marks the convergence of recursive power and the possibility of radical contestation, an important shift has occurred: rather than advocating a coalitional practice, Butler has transformed the marginal figure “queer” into an *exemplary* democratic agent.

Thus, although queer theory emerges from the insight that critiquing recursive marginality is central to political struggle, queer theorists like Butler have tended to conflate intersectionality’s *mode of critique* with its *political praxis* by slipping from a specific site in which relations of ruling are generated – the family – to making the claim that the marginalized figure at its center – the queer – represents the democratic promise of the Left. From this angle, Butler’s democratic politics strain deeply against the insights of intersectionality. Whereas Smith, for example, explicitly cautions against conflating one’s structural relation to power with one’s commitment to democratic coalition-building, Butler does not acknowledge a distinction between the *critique* of “what must be cut out from a concept of unity in order for it to gain the appearance of necessity and coherence” and the queer’s *political* “refusal to become resubordinated.”¹⁵⁹ For Butler, queer politics are thus less embedded in a coalitional practice than they are in a politics of critique.

Butler’s “Merely Cultural” is hardly the only text within queer theory that illustrates the slippage between democracy-as-coalition and democracy-as-critique. Michael Warner, for example, similarly elides the critique of specific form of queer

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

marginality and a commitment to a democratic politics of anti-subordination in his widely cited introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. In it, he argues that “because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions,” queer struggles “may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are.”¹⁶⁰ Like Butler, Warner describes the ways in which sexual hierarchy generates certain relations of ruling that become embedded in discursive and institutional practices. Also like Butler, however, Warner continues to argue that because sexual regulation underwrites the symbolic order, contesting the norms that reproduce this order can reasonably stand in for a democratic resistance to subordination in “an indescribably wide range of social institutions.” Warner continues:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body.¹⁶¹

To be “queer,” then, is to be in opposition to any and all of these potential sites of power, a move which is understood to be democratic because it symbolizes the refusal to be resubordinated by new forms of power. Such an opening of the possible sites of critique carries the promise of contesting power wherever it appears: for Warner, queer antinormativity thus represents “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 6.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 16.

In seeking to incorporate the lessons of intersectionality, queer theorists have paradoxically claimed to supersede intersectional theorists' key political insight: for Butler and Warner, as for more contemporary thinkers like Duong and Schotten, queer theory's ambition is to become a *more thorough* praxis than frameworks, like intersectionality, which take only contextual sites of power as their object and offer only coalitional promises. The queer – the exemplary figure produced and policed by recursive power – becomes the paradigmatic figure of democratic politics by superseding the challenges of coalitional work. José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, writes that a queer democratic praxis should *exceed* the apparently identity-invested practices of coalition-building. Coalitions, for Muñoz, require a form of undemocratic thinking that require marginalized subjects to invest in rarefied and discrete identities. In contrast, because they refuse marginalization *in general* as opposed to “merely” coalitional sites of “identification/counter-identification,” the more fluid *disidentificatory* practices of queers of color might furnish “the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres.”¹⁶³ Pausing on this final claim, then, the “more thorough resistance” that queer theorists have advocated appears to fold back on itself: while it emerges from and engages with intersectional thinking, queer theory has come to make the counterintuitive claim that queer politics represents an exemplary form of resistance that *contains* the emancipatory aspirations of all sorts of recursively marginalized subjects: “In this view,” for example, “‘queer’ is merely [the] structural, catchall designation” containing “black and indigenous folks, the disabled, and queer youths of color.” Queer politics, rather than a

¹⁶³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

localized, contextual, or coalitional struggle, stands in for a liberatory “solidarity with people and knowledge from below.”¹⁶⁴

“Second Wave” Feminism and the Task of Coalition

Set against the apparently more modest and identitarian goal of coalition-building, queer theorists clearly see their task not only as promoting a situated politics of anti-subordination, but a refusal of the dynamics of marginalization in ways that are motivated by intersectional thinking – even as they claim to exceed and transcend intersectionality itself. But while these two conceptions of political engagement both emerge from the impulse to understand how hierarchies produce and marginalize certain subjects, on the one hand, and to inaugurate a political praxis that resists reproducing such marginalizations, on the other, conceiving of democratic transformation in terms of coalition is fundamentally distinct from thinking it in terms of the critique of normative identity. If intersectional scholars have criticized anti-normative queer theory for its politics, then, I want to suggest that it is because they have conflated the task of coalition with the task of critique. Collins, for example, has pointed out that there is a danger in assuming that writing “from the margins” (either as Black women or as queer subjects) can rise to the level of an exemplary political stance.¹⁶⁵ Cohen, too, suggests that “deviance” is conceptually and politically distinct from “defiance:” “[O]pening up... new counter normative space is not enough,” she writes; “Organizations, networks, and groups have to be mobilized that will engage those making deviant decisions in a

¹⁶⁴ Schotten, *Queer Terror*, 114.

¹⁶⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 129.

sustained discussion about opposition, agency, and norms... Consciousness must be raised as processes and institutions of regulation are exposed.”¹⁶⁶

It is in the spirit of recovering something of the project of transforming the family as a site of *coalitional* contestation that I turn, finally, to the “second wave” author Adrienne Rich. Such a move may surprise. I do so not to argue that Rich altogether exemplifies the task of understanding the family as a site of coalitional possibility, but because she shares surprisingly fundamental insights about the family as a nodal site of recursive power with intersectional theorists, and because her trajectory as a writer and theorist throughout the 1980s highlights the requirements of the coalitional project in which she and her intersectional interlocutors engage. In this way, reading her work from within the family of “recursive” critical theory – indicative as it is of much of what has been dismissed as second-wave, cultural feminist theorizing – suggests a kind of coalitional accountability that queer theorists would do well to reconsider.

Works like Rich’s represent, for many contemporary theorists, a form of “second wave” thinking in which the category “woman” is taken to be the fundamental experience of oppression. Queer theorists, for example, point to passages like this one, from the first chapter of *Of Woman Born* to argue that hers is a form of “cultural feminism” against which both intersectional and queer theorists stake their claims:

Motherhood – unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism – has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual, seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual, seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women’s reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics,

¹⁶⁶ Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *The Du Bois Review* 1, vol. 1 (2004): 41

gynecology, and extrauterine reproductive experiments – all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers.¹⁶⁷

Here, Rich seems to conflate her own experiences of motherhood as a white woman with those across time, space, class, race, and other kinds of differences. Rich's critics – for example, Alice Echols, who derided Rich for "[turning feminism's] attention away from opposing male supremacy to creating a female counterculture"¹⁶⁸ – suggest that because Rich does not adequately interrogate the central categories "woman" or "mother" for its racial, classed, or sexual differences, she engages in precisely the kind of marginalizing identity politics that queer theory would later imagine as its primary foe. Indeed, along with texts like Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will, Of Woman Born* has been criticized for its lack of engagement with difference, for its reduction of race and racism to a derivative of sexist oppression, for its nearly exclusive emphasis on heterosexuality as the location of patriarchal norms – in short, for its insistence that a "woman-only space...where patriarchy was evaded rather than engaged"¹⁶⁹ would "bring far more essential change to human society" than any other form of resistance or revolution.¹⁷⁰ And Echols is not alone. Feminists such as Linda Alcoff associate Rich's recursive theory with cultural feminism, the "ideology of a female nature or female essence reappropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes."¹⁷¹ Indeed, Alcoff voices a suspicion about

¹⁶⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (New York: Norton, 1986 [1976]), 34.

¹⁶⁸ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 5.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 285.

¹⁷¹ Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 13 vol. 3 (1988): 408.

Rich's analysis of motherhood that is, today, taken to be a starting point by queer theorists: that it would be "difficult to render the views of Rich... into a coherent whole without supplying a missing premise that there is an innate female essence"¹⁷² and that "the cultural feminist championing of a redefined 'womanhood' cannot provide a useful long-range program for a feminist movement and, in fact, places obstacles in the way of developing one."¹⁷³ In short, these critics of Rich believe that hers is precisely the kind of feminism that the intersectional interventions of the 1980s were aimed at discrediting.

Understanding her work in this way, contemporary critical scholars have sought ways to move *beyond* ostensibly limited critiques like Rich's. However, these suspicions of Rich's work have largely ignored other contemporaneous accounts by thinkers like Elizabeth Spelman, who employed the concept "white solipsism," a term Rich coined, to "[ask] us to reflect on the culturally assigned differences between having a Black or a white body, as well as on the differences between having the body of a woman or of a man."¹⁷⁴ Indeed, recalling Rich as a thinker more complexly situated in relation to Black, Third World, and intersectional feminisms raises several questions about the ways that queer theorists have proposed to supersede "second wave" feminism *and* intersectional theory. If, as I shall suggest below, Rich in fact shares key insights with both critical and intersectional theorists, queer theorists' "beyonding" comes at the price of a political analysis of the ways that the family differently marginalizes lesbians, women of color, and other "deviant" groups. Moreover, it is intersectional theorists' willingness to engage

¹⁷² Ibid., 412.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 414.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 130

thinkers like Rich as collaborators and thinkers that has earned them the charge of having remained attached to an identitarian politics. Duong, for example, argues that although intersectional theorists' entanglements with second wave feminism may have had "political purchase... for feminists in the past,"¹⁷⁵ queer theory can "teach" intersectionality how to move beyond the "enormous mistake [of] attempting to study and identify queers and their claimed worlds as things that can be identified."¹⁷⁶ However, the assumption that the coalitional engagement between intersectional theorists and second wave feminists is less *political* than queer "world-making" is, as I have suggested, an unwarranted reduction of the intersectional argument itself. Thus, when queer theorists presume to move *beyond* a text like *Of Woman Born* – especially when they do so in the name of doing intersectionality *better* than intersectional thinkers themselves – they also sacrifice the opportunity to engage in the very coalitional work that intersectional theorists put at the heart of democratic politics.¹⁷⁷

Although Rich turns her attention to a wide variety of marginalized subjects across her works, it is her treatment of lesbians as a specific marginalized group that is one of her most enduring legacies. Indeed, it is her turn to what she calls the "lesbian continuum" – the commitment to a "primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and

¹⁷⁵ Duong, "What Can Queer Theory Teach Us About Intersectionality?," 374.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁷⁷ These questions about the "unsettled and unsettling" status of so-called second wave feminism owe considerably to works on what Victoria Hesford has called the "historicity" of feminism. See, for example, Victoria Hesford, "Feminism and its Ghosts: The Spectre of the Feminist-as-Lesbian," *Feminist Theory* 6 vol. 3 (2005): 227-250; Estelle Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31 vol. 4 (2000): 727-44; Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

receiving of practical and political support”¹⁷⁸ – that Echols, among others, interprets as a commitment to “personal rather than social transformation.”¹⁷⁹ However, a closer reading of the text and its relationship to Rich’s other works reveals a much different reality: in fact, Rich was engaged in precisely the kind of situated, recursive analysis of the family that motivated intersectional theorists during the 1980s. Although her work ought not be considered an *exemplary* approach to resisting marginalization, I would suggest that in contrast to the depiction of her work on offer by her critics, Rich continually refuses to conflate the marginal position of “the lesbian” with other concrete relationships produced by nuclear family.

Let us begin again from the basic premise that, like many forms of domination, sexism operates first and foremost by generating the very normative discourses and institutional practices – that is, the relations of rule – that it presumes. Like many other critical theorists, Rich wishes to resist the ruse. She does so by drawing on the same insight that Marxist, Foucaultian, intersectional, and queer theorists do: by exploring the recursive dimensions of power. For Rich, this power begins with the facts of biological reproduction: although it is women who must bear children, Rich maintains from the outset that “motherhood,” with all its ideological and cultural implications, is neither a biological nor an obvious fact. Instead, she suggests, motherhood is one manifestation of a specific relation of rule: heterosexual nuclear families – with “mothers” at their center – are legitimized only through the production and policing of various kinds of marginalized subjects. “The institution of motherhood,” she writes, “is not identical with bearing and

¹⁷⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5 vol. 4 (1980); 648-649.

¹⁷⁹ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 5.

caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love.”¹⁸⁰ Instead,

Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not “reality” but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives... The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests; behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal.¹⁸¹

Thus, like other analyses of the family, Rich argues that its *specific* relation of rule functions by producing marginal subjects – women who seek abortions, lesbians, illegitimate children – whose very existence and subsequent punishment serves to legitimize and valorize a specific arrangement of reproductive and sexual relations. In other words, the procreative family, for Rich, is not a *repressive* institution that enforces preexisting hierarchies, but a *recursive* one that generates the very marginal subjects that it presumes.

In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich uses this analysis of the family to make a set of claims about lesbians as *specifically* produced and policed as marginal subjects in relation to the family. The idea that “most women are innately heterosexual” (and therefore “fit for entry” into the family unit as actual or potential mothers), she writes, is less a refusal of women’s “essential” nature as women-identified than it is a political imposition, by means both subtle and violent, that marginalizes certain women and punishes them in the name of legitimizing the family unit. The assumption of heterosexuality, she writes, “remains a tenable assumption...”

partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized,

¹⁸⁰ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 42.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and ‘innately’ heterosexual...¹⁸²

For Rich, however, to acknowledge the ways that heterosexuality is “imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” is not simply to argue that women are more naturally fit for some undifferentiated cultural lesbianism. Rather, it is to open up the possibility of imagining new ways of relating to one another, of acknowledging the difficult work of consciousness-raising, defiance, and coalition-building that would need to be done to relate differently to motherhood, sexuality, and one another:

To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a ‘preference’ or a ‘choice’ for women – and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows – will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing-up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships.¹⁸³

The “intellectual and emotional work” that Rich describes entails, as she puts it later in the essay, a recognition that although “‘lesbian existence’ is potentially liberating for all women,” it is also “work that must assuredly move beyond the limits of white and middle-class Western women’s studies to examine women’s lives, work, and groupings within every racial, ethnical, and political structure.”¹⁸⁴

Elsewhere, Rich more explicitly acknowledges that identifying a specific form of marginality does not – and cannot – easily translate into a transformational coalitional politics. In her 1986 introduction to *Of Woman Born*, for instance, Rich reflects on the charges of “cultural feminism” that were levied against her:

I have felt recently that the late 1960s Women’s Liberation thesis that ‘the personal is political’... has been overlaid by a New Age blur of the personal-for-its-own-sake, as if ‘the personal is good’ has become the corollary and the thesis

¹⁸² Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 648.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 648.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 659.

forgotten [...] The question of what do we want beyond a ‘safe space’ is crucial to the differences between the individualistic telling with no place to go and a collective movement to empower women.¹⁸⁵

Here, Rich (who cites Audre Lorde in this passage) shares in the intersectional intuition that *coalition* is distinct from *critique*; there are, she argues, crucial differences between the *telling* of marginalization and the “collective movement to empower women” – between “deviance” and “defiance.” Like Smith and Cohen, who argue that political movements must resist the temptation to conflate a recursively marginalized subject’s structural relation to power (deviance) and a liberatory politics *par excellence* (defiance), Rich suggests throughout her 1986 introduction that the dangers of conflating the two moments are many.

On the one hand, Rich argues, conflating deviance and defiance can cause a movement to collapse a structural analysis of power into the narrowing of a radical political agenda into a single-issue campaign. In the Women’s movement, for example, Rich argues that the recursive analysis of power has opened up the possibility of developing

a collective movement which is antipatriarchal, which places the highest value on the development of human beings, on economic justice, on respect for racial, cultural, sexual, and ethnic diversity, on providing the material conditions for children to flower into responsible and creative women and men, and on the redirection and eventual extirpation of the propensity for violence.¹⁸⁶

At the same time, however, this movement is constantly at risk of becoming, instead, one that is “narrowly concerned with pregnancy and birth” but does *not* “ask questions and demand answers about the lives of children, the priorities of government.”¹⁸⁷ Such a

¹⁸⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, x.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

movement, she argues, would be “a movement in which individual families rely on consumerism and educational privilege to supply their own children with good nutrition, schooling, health care;” it would be one which “can, while perceiving itself as progressive or alternative, exist only as a minor contradiction within a society most of whose children grow up in poverty and which places its highest priority on the technology of war.”¹⁸⁸ For Rich, though, it’s not *only* that a movement that conflates deviance with defiance fails to make the radical change it promises; it also risks actually exacerbating the problem. “To the extent that the alternative-childbirth movement has focused on birth as a single issue,” she writes, “it has been a reform easily subsumed into a new idealism of the family. Its feminist origins have been dimmed along with its potential challenge to the economics and practices of medicalized childbirth and to the separation of motherhood and sexuality.”¹⁸⁹

To be sure, Rich’s work in *Of Woman Born* is certainly inspired by so-called “second wave” classics such as Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex*. Like Firestone, who argues that the feminist revolution would entail a “seizure of the means of reproduction,”¹⁹⁰ Rich argues in the 1976 edition of *Of Woman Born* that the “repossession of women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers.”¹⁹¹ Also like Firestone,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., xii.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Shulamith Firestone. “Abortion Rally Speech,” in *Notes from the First Year*. In it, she writes, of motherhood: “We refuse to be your passive vessels becoming impregnated for the greater good of society. We want a society that exists for our good as well as yours! We are not just grease between men, links between generations, not just the mothers of sons and their future wives! We are tired of being pawns in a male power game.” (New York Radical Women, 1968), 25.

¹⁹¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 285.

Rich seems to assume throughout the text that “patriarchy” is an overarching structure that denotes the “cross-cultural, global domination of women by men,” a domination that exists “at the core of all power-relationships” and undergirds the whole “sexual understructure of social and political forms.”¹⁹² However, as much as Rich’s work is inspired by and situated within these kinds of “second-wave” influences, she is clearly just as much – and, by the 1980s, even more so – influenced by the same Black, Third World, and lesbian feminists who developed the intersectional intuition that animates queer theory. In her 1986 introduction, for example she writes that “I would not end this book today, as I did in 1976,” by arguing that women’s “repossession” of their bodies would be a more fundamental change than class revolution:

If indeed the free exercise of sexual and procreative choice will catalyze enormous social transformations (and I believe this), I also believe that this can only happen hand in hand with, neither before nor after, other claims which women and certain men have been denied for centuries: the claim to personhood; the claim to share justly in the products of our labor, not to be used merely as an instrument, a role, a womb, a pair of hands or a back or a set of fingers; to participate fully in the decisions of our workplace, our community; to speak for ourselves, in our own right.¹⁹³

Rich’s engagement with “other claims [of] women and certain men” is far from superficial. More importantly, I want to suggest, her work bears more resemblance to the coalitional claims of intersectional theorists than do the queer theories that were inspired by the purported failures of “second wave” and “cultural feminist” perspectives. In the years between *Of Woman Born*’s first printing and the 1986 second edition, Rich engaged deeply with the critiques and arguments of Black and Third World feminists. In a 1978

¹⁹² Ibid., 56.

¹⁹³ Ibid., xxiii.

essay later reprinted in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*,¹⁹⁴ Rich situates her engagement in race and racism within feminism as a response to Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," the Combahee River Collective statement, Pat Robinson's "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women in the Cities," and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*. The conversations, provocations, and challenges raised in these works and others affected Rich deeply, and, by 1986, she had committed herself not to the task of superseding or "correcting" the flaws of second wave feminism, but of holding herself *responsible* for the limitations and shortcomings of her own thinking.

In a 1979 interview with Audre Lorde printed first in *Signs* and later reprinted in *Sister Outsider*, for instance, Lorde pushes Rich to engage more deeply in the different ways that race affects women as mothers, workers, lesbians, and political organizers. In it, Lorde neither suggests that Black feminists should move "beyond" frameworks like Rich's nor offers Rich an apology for holding her accountable for the shortcomings in her thinking. "I wish we could explore this more," Rich states, "about you and me, but also in general... the differences in alternatives or choices we are offered as Black and white women."¹⁹⁵ Responding, Lorde both chastises Rich and holds her accountable for failing to recognize how "the entrapments and the weapons used to neutralize us are not the same."

Adrienne, in my journals I have a lot of pieces of conversations that I'm having with you in my head. I'll be having a conversation with you and I'll put it in my journal because stereotypically or symbolically these conversations occur in a

¹⁹⁴ An earlier version of the essay was delivered as a talk at the MLA conference as part of a panel entitled "The Transformation of Silence into Action," which also included Audre Lorde, Mary Daly, and Judith McDaniel. The essay was originally printed along with the other panelists' remarks in *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978).

¹⁹⁵ Audre Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," *Sister Outsider*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983), 103.

space of Black woman/white woman where it's beyond Adrienne and Audre, almost as if we're two voices [...] I've never forgotten the impatience in your voice that time on the telephone, when you said, 'It's not enough to say that you intuit it.' Do you remember? I will never forget that. Even at the same time that I understood what you meant, I felt a total wipeout of my modus, my way of perceiving and formulating.¹⁹⁶

Responding, Rich is forced to acknowledge that

I've had great resistance to some of your perceptions. They can be very painful to me. Perceptions about what goes on between us, what goes on between Black and white people, what goes on between black and white women. So, it's not that I can just accept your perceptions unblinkingly. Some of them are very hard for me. But I don't want to deny them. I know I can't afford to [...] What I can't afford either is to wipe out your perceptions or to pretend I understand you when I don't. And then, if it's a question of racism – and I don't mean just the overt violence out there but also all the differences in our ways of seeing – there's always the question: 'How do I use this? What do I do about it?'¹⁹⁷

The question Lorde raises, then, is not whether a more intersectional feminism must move *beyond* Rich, but the extent to which she might be held accountable for the foundations and effects of her theorizing. Likewise, however, for Rich, recognizing the irreducibility of her marginal position as a lesbian to the experience of race and racism – a recognition that would “wipe out your perceptions or... pretend I understand you when I don't” – is an essential first step towards remaking these relationships in coalition.

By 1981, Rich had published an essay in *Sinister Wisdom*, which she was then editing, inspired by her engagement with Barbara Smith's “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism.”¹⁹⁸ In it, Rich argues that “we must recognize and reclaim an anti-racist female tradition, closely entwined though not identical with feminist tradition;”¹⁹⁹ such an anti-

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹⁸ Barbara Smith, “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” *The Radical Teacher* 7 (1978); 20-27.

¹⁹⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Comments,” *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1981); 19.

racist stance, she argues, would insist that “Hetero-feminism is still not a feminism in its wholeness, any more than a feminism engages in passive racism is worthy of the name.”²⁰⁰ In other words, Rich is asking what *responsibility* a Black (and) lesbian feminist coalition has to attending to the specific, contextual marginalizations of Black women and lesbians without presuming that any one resistance “contains” or exemplifies any other. “In her *Conditions* article, Barbara Smith says that she would like ‘to encourage in white women a sane accountability to all the women who live and write on this soil,’” Rich writes:

Speaking as a white Lesbian/feminist, I would add that for this accountability to be truly sane, it cannot be nourished by guilt, nor by ‘correct politics’ nor by the false consciousness born of powerless responsibility; nor can it be felt as an accountability to some shadowy ‘other,’ the Black Woman, the myth. It cannot, above all, be founded in ignorance.²⁰¹

In responding to the claims of the same Black and Third World feminists from which both intersectional and queer theorists take their cue, then, Rich points less to the need to *exemplify* difference in her bearing as a lesbian feminist. Instead, her work points to the need to hold women differently marginalized and punished by the same forces – such as the nuclear family – *responsible* for forging new relationships with one another.

While Rich’s is not an explicitly intersectional feminism – and while some of the criticisms of her work are certainly valid – it is also more than merely a “second wave” or “cultural” feminism in the common sense of those terms. By turning to the example of so-called “second wave” analyses like Rich’s, I mean to reopen conversation about the political ambitions of the intersectional project: What does it mean to think, act, or resist

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 23.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

in coalition? Beneath this question lie deeper, more profound questions about the ways in which queer theory has taken up the insights of intersectionality. In suggesting, in ways both implicit and explicit, that queer theory is a *more thorough resistance* than intersectionality, queer thinkers run the risk not only of decontextualizing the relations of ruling, such as the white nuclear family, in which marginal subjects are produced. Just as importantly, in arguing that the queer's *paradigmatic* marginality is a cipher for all other forms of recursive marginalization, queer theorists have paradoxically homogenized the tensions between the political lessons on offer by Rich and her intersectional interlocutors by claiming that "queer" represents *all* recursively marginalized subjects at once.

Coalition-building, instead, requires that no single critique of recursive power stands in for the difficult process of building coalitions – and holding one another responsible – across a range of highly contextual, and often *conflicting and contradictory*, sites of struggle. The example of Adrienne Rich, then, is an important one in this context – one which I would suggest points to a more demanding democratic practice than queer theorists have often imagined. What might it look like to act in coalition with those who, like Rich, are committed to the political contestation of recursive hierarchies, even as they must constantly contest their own tendencies to reproduce marginalization and account for their own failures to do so? The lessons of intersectional coalition-building suggest the need for a politics of accountability that would simultaneously share in her opposition to structural power even as it holds her responsible, as Lorde and other women of color feminists did, for the ways that she has failed to refuse to resubordinate others. It would echo Cathy Cohen, who argues that a "reconceptualization of the politics of marginal groups allows us not only to privilege the specific experience of distinct

communities, but also to search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles... And it is in these complicated and contradictory spaces that the liberatory and left politics that so many of us work for is located.”²⁰² Such a politics would also echo the Combahee River Collective statement, which holds that allies need not perfectly embody anti-subordination politics in order to be held accountable to them.²⁰³

Conclusion

These questions about the relationship between democracy-as-coalition and democracy-as-critique are vitally important in a context in which it has become increasingly difficult to think these two modes of politics together. As queer organizations struggle to parse difficult and intractable questions about internal hierarchies – between, for example, cisgender lesbians and transwomen²⁰⁴ or between white queers, queers of color, and queers of the global south²⁰⁵ – questions about whether queer anti-normativity has actually produced a more democratic politics have only become more urgent and uncertain. In such a context, I think, it is worth returning to the lessons of intersectional coalition-building, which have been a persistent refrain in queer politics since its emergence.

²⁰² Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 482.

²⁰³ “We struggle together with Black men against racism,” the authors write, “while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.”

²⁰⁴ See, for example, the recent skirmish around the use of the term “TERF” in outlets such as the Daily Nous: <http://dailynous.com/2018/08/27/derogatory-language-philosophy-journal-hostility-discussion/>

²⁰⁵ See, for example, “Divorcing the Trans Community,” *Tablet Magazine*, March 13, 2018. http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/257446/divorcing-the-transgender-community?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=post&utm_campaign=Mar2018

I want to suggest that making a claim about the exemplary nature of discursive power participates, paradoxically and perhaps unconsciously, in the notion that certain exercises of power are “more fundamental” than others. At best, this is a spurious assumption. At worst, as Rich and intersectional theorists alike warn us, it can actually *enable* the persistence of institutional power as we fail to notice the ways in which some institutions stay profoundly the same even as marginalizing discourses about them shift and change. In this vein, queers and queer theorists should remember the extent to which the anti-normative claim has been, historically, deeply imbricated with the promulgation of so-called “family values.” Indeed, it was Gayle Rubin who wrote in “Thinking Sex” that rapidly changing normative discourses about sex and sexuality rapidly often occur *in conjunction with* legal and political battles seeking to shore up the institutional legitimacy of the family. In this sense, the family and its “values” are a nodal point in which normative discourses about sexuality (Rubin’s “hierarchical system of sexual value”²⁰⁶) *coincide* with attempts to strengthen the institution of the family through state sanctioned reproductive practices, the extension of marriage rights, and the legal codification of gendered violence and hierarchy. Because of the novelty of different domains that feminists and queer theorists explore, readers tend to be captivated by new arguments without realizing that making these moves has failed to deal with the intersection of norms in persistent nodes, like the family, in which power accumulates.

What’s worse, however, is that conflating antinormative thinking with the very possibility of democratic transformation puts critical theorists in the position of making judgments about what – or who – counts as “exemplary” agents in relation to the

²⁰⁶ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 151.

interlocking sites and logics of power. In arguing that queer theory exceeds and transcends intersectional thinking – even as it emerges from and engages in intersectional lessons – queer theorists have run the risk of making judgments that render *all* recursively marginalized subjects as “queer” subjects. The apparent need for ultimately impossible judgments about whether Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized women are really “queer” figures, for example, bespeaks the paradoxically undemocratic features of a critical theory that has conflated the *general* political refusal to re-subordinate the marginalized with the *specific* institutions of domination in which the marginalized are produced and policed. Although anti-normative critique is intended to avoid such political challenges by insisting on a radical contingency, anti-normative theorists have paradoxically put themselves in the position of deciding which sites, subjects, and dimensions of power are appropriate targets for political critique and praxis, and which ones are simply particular instantiations of “queer” marginality. It is time, I think, to reopen the question of intersectional coalition: from what *multiplicitous* sites would we need to think in order to understand the scope of power?

Queer critical theorists concerned with a reinvigorated critical and political praxis should, I argue, return to interrogating contextual sites of recursive power – like the nuclear family – in which power may well function in ways that are irreducibly to normativity, but that are nevertheless persistent sites of continued marginalization and punishment. This task, I would argue, will prove to be neither as clear-cut nor as seamless as queer theorists have often hoped. It will, instead, recall Bernice Johnson Reagon’s warning about coalition: sometimes we will have to work with people who “ain’t our people” – perhaps, even, with thinkers like Adrienne Rich – in order to think and act

coalitionally. Engaging in Rich's fraught legacy provides a good example of what this kind of coalitional work might look like; while her analysis remains irreducibly imbricated in a white point of view that fails to take adequate account of racism and other privileges, she nonetheless shares the key goal of ending hierarchical relations of ruling. The task of coalition, then, may not be to move *beyond* thinkers like Rich, but to hold those whose politics they have influenced accountable for working against the re-subordination of their political allies. Feminist, queer, and critical theorists have long known that claiming one's critical perspective to be exemplary is a grave danger; multiplying our perspectives on power will thus continue to be a responsibility required by and for political engagement. "The responsibility is twofold," writes an author in the lesbian publication *Sinister Wisdom* in 1985: "not to silence others, and not to let ourselves be silenced. Neither is easy."²⁰⁷ This is the lesson that underwrote both intersectional and anti-normative queer theory; it is time to reclaim it.

²⁰⁷ Susanna J. Sturgis, "Is this the new thing we're going to have to be politically correct about?" in *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (1985): 26

Chapter 2

The Loving Public:

Separation, Transformation, and Political Speech in Lesbian Feminist Theorizing

In March 1976, members of the Society for Women and Philosophy (SWIP) met to discuss an editorial policy for a new journal pitched to and for “women philosophers.” The prospect of an academic journal written, edited, and read by women philosophers was, as many of its contributors at the time noted, both novelty and artifact. On the one hand, an academic journal dealing with “feminist philosophy” had never before been proposed, and the purpose of creating one was obscure – so much so that one of the contributors to its proposal, Vicki Levine, wrote to her fellow co-contributor Jackie Thomason that “My main question [about the proposal] has to do with... the fact that I don’t know what’s involved in the ‘area of philosophy and feminism.’”²⁰⁸ On the other hand, however, the advent of “a journal of our own”²⁰⁹ could come only after the vast proliferation of feminist newsletters, magazines, pamphlets, and other media during the 1970s had made it possible to think of feminism as a philosophical endeavor. In her comments on a draft of the journal’s policies, for example, Sarah Hoagland wonders aloud if the new journal will “be topic oriented like *Quest* or *Heresies*,” whether it will “encourage theoretical works in non-philosophicese like *Sinister Wisdom*... and *Chrysalis*,” or whether it will “put out calls for papers in the National Women’s Studies

²⁰⁸ Letter, Vicki Levine November 20, 1975, Series One, Society for Women in Philosophy Files, Feminist Theory Archive at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, Brown University.

²⁰⁹²⁰⁹ Interview with Hypatia Founders and Editors. 25th Anniversary Conference: Feminist Legacies/Feminist Futures, University of Washington, October 2009.

Association Newsletter or *Matrices*.”²¹⁰ Defining “feminist philosophy,” it seemed, would be no simple task. Indeed, its writers presented the proposed draft in March ‘76 alongside a summary of the vast debates over the scope, politics, and audience of the journal that had wracked the burgeoning editorial board for a half a year. By the time of the meeting, these debates remained utterly unresolved.

Although the resulting journal, now known as *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, would not appear in print until 1982,²¹¹ it was at this first editorial meeting at the American Philosophical Association in 1976 that the tensions inherent in the project of feminist publishing landed with a thud in the academy. Indeed, the meeting centered around the relationship between the goals of *feminist* audiences, institutions, and concepts and those of the academy: To what audiences, for example, would the new journal write? Was feminist philosophy primarily for an academic philosophical audience, or a grassroots political one? Should feminist philosophy seek alternative venues – for example, presses outside of academic institutions or explicitly feminist presses – in order to reach these audiences? What was the relationship between feminist philosophy and the traditional disciplinary values that underpinned the academy as a reading and writing community? One SWIP member’s notes from the meeting reveal, for instance, the circularity – and, at times, the sheer confusion – of the debate over these questions. While the original draft proposed that “the journal will contain [at least] an article in the area of feminist philosophy,” the member crossed out this entire statement, replacing it with “the

²¹⁰ Letter, Sara Hoagland, October 1, 1978, Series One, Society for Women in Philosophy Files, Feminist Theory Archive.

²¹¹ The first two issues of *Hypatia* were printed as “piggy-back” issues of the *Women’s Studies International Forum*, printed by Pergamon Press. *Hypatia*’s first stand-alone issue was printed in 1983.

journal will be comprised of philosophical articles.” This, too, was later struck from the draft, and the member replaced “philosophical articles” with “articles in the area of feminist [philosophy].”²¹² The issue, it seems, were unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) tensions between feminism’s role in the academic institution (and its relations to “traditional” disciplines such as philosophy), its political commitments to “the development of feminist visionary imagination/creation,”²¹³ and the distinct audiences that these two roles address. In a word, even as feminist theory was becoming more *public*, issues over the terms of its *publication* were becoming ever-more fraught.

That same year, two non-academic feminist magazines published their own high-profile debates about the tensions in publishing for feminist audiences, and about the capacity of feminist presses to radically transform political life. In Summer 1976, June Arnold published “Feminist Presses & Feminist Politics” in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, a magazine printed by the feminist Diana Press and edited by Charlotte Bunch. In it, Arnold argued provocatively that while feminist work had begun gaining a foothold in the popular presses, the feminist movement *required* an “independent women’s communications network.” No feminist movement published in the “finishing press” (the male-owned popular presses so called “because it is our movement they intend to finish”), Arnold argued, would survive the assimilation.²¹⁴ By fall 1976, *Sinister Wisdom* also published a wide-ranging debate on the politics of feminist publishing, this time in the form of a survey report collated by Jan Clausen in the magazine’s second issue.

²¹² Draft of “Editorial Proposal,” 1976. Series One, SWIP files. Pembroke Center for Research and Teaching on Women, Brown University.

²¹³ Letter, Sarah Hoagland, 1978. Series One, SWIP files.

²¹⁴ June Arnold, “Feminist Presses and Feminist Politics,” *Quest* 3 vol. 1 (Summer 1976): 18.

Citing “several controversies involving publishing decisions [that] arose within the lesbian community,” including “the proposed publication of a second lesbian issue of *Margins*, the review of little magazines and small press books,” Clausen writes that her desire to explore the politics of publishing arose from “the fact that a publishing decision affecting a large number of women has been made on the basis of what appeared to be a minority’s political convictions.”²¹⁵ Like the members of SWIP, the contributors to *Sinister Wisdom*’s debate over publication seem closely attuned to the ways in which the institutions, norms, and methods of disseminating feminist writing could shape, strain, and call forth different kinds of feminist audiences.

In this chapter, I argue that although the issues of feminist institutions, audiences, and publication that arose in the SWIP editorial meeting, as well as in the pages of *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom*, went (and, to a large degree, remain) unresolved, the tensions that they illuminated in 1976 are crucial for understanding the ways that lesbian feminism has been misrecognized by academic feminists since the early 1980s. As I argued in my introduction and in Chapter 1, queer theorists have retroactively imposed an interpretation of lesbian feminism that mistakenly identifies it as an attempt to establish a stable identity category (“lesbian”), to police the boundaries of that category, and to exclude those whose practices or politics “trouble” the stability of the category lesbian. In this chapter, however, I want to take this analysis a step further: not only has this interpretation been *imposed* onto lesbian feminism of the 1980s, it in fact misrecognizes the political claims that lesbian feminists sought to make during the period. Lesbian

²¹⁵ Jan Clausen, “The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community,” *Sinister Wisdom* 2, Fall 1976.

feminism, I argue in the pages that follow, was not an attempt to develop a stable category of existence – indeed, as I show below, discussions about what it meant to “be” a lesbian were considered politically toxic during much of the 1980s. Such conversations, which developed only as theorists began to yoke lesbianism to the methodology of poststructuralism in the late 1980s, are thus largely at odds with the actual political discourse of the 1980s.

How, then, *should* feminist political theorists understand the political discourse of 1980s lesbian feminism? In what follows, I suggest that rather than reading lesbian feminism as an attempt to create a stable identity category, we ought to understand lesbian feminists as attempting to call forth a new *public*. This way of thinking about lesbian feminism not only echoes recent historical scholarship that situates the women’s movement in terms of its place-making capacities rather than in terms of its ideology,²¹⁶ but also calls attention to the defining political challenge of lesbian feminism: its attempts to call forth a political audience that was both racially diverse from the start and committed to negotiating the interlocking structures of oppression that circulate in public life.²¹⁷ Calling forth this new public, for many lesbian feminists at the time, would

²¹⁶ See, for example, A. Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²¹⁷ The fact that “second wave” women’s politics was, in fact, racially diverse – and incredibly influenced by women of color – from the start is a growing consensus in historical scholarship on the period. To name only a few, see Stephanie Gilmore, “Thinking about Feminist Coalitions,” *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Sara M. Evans, “Women’s Liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly,” *Feminist Studies* 41 vol.1 (2015); 138-149; Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press,

require a radical rethinking of the relationships between knowledge production, institutions of publication, and political audiences in ways that might make it possible to sustain a coalitional politics across differences. At the same time, however, thinking of lesbian feminism as a form of publicity calls attention to the risks and disjunctures that inhere in remaking these relationships at every turn; because lesbian feminists sought to make space for – rather than resolve – racial, classed, and other perspectival differences, their political thinking highlight the challenges and tensions that arise when coalitions attempt to move from theoretical diagnosis to institution-building, and from institution-building to coalitional praxis. As I will argue below, lesbian feminists were often uniquely attuned to the ways that even the most utopian emergent publics risk collapsing into longstanding relations of power by smoothing over these disjunctive moments.

In the pages that follow, I trace the various ways that lesbian feminists, both in and out of the academy, articulated the political tasks and responsibilities of a new lesbian feminist public, emphasizing in particular the ways that these tasks and responsibilities seek – and sometimes fail – to keep relationships of power in view at all times. First, I offer a reading of the politics of publicity in mainstream political theory in order to suggest that although questions about the persistence of power within public life are continually raised in political theory, they too often recede from view in favor of questions about the various roles of deliberation, reason, and judgment in politics. Highlighting this persistent failure in political theory to account for power in debates over the public sphere, I suggest, alerts us to the political risks that lesbian feminists faced as

2005); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

they sought to inaugurate a new public; in particular, the risk of foreclosing negotiation between those most authorized to speak for ‘the’ public and those whose voices are marginalized.

Next, I read a popular debate about the role of “loving” women in lesbian feminism from the early 1980s against these more traditional interpretations of “the public sphere.” Many queer and feminist theorists have understood lesbian feminist appeals to love as precursors to what some call the “affective turn” – that is, while they don’t follow thinkers like Arendt in viewing love as “worldless” and therefore apolitical,²¹⁸ they tend to view lesbian feminists’ emphasis on love as a way of mapping “the sensate knowledge of women whose experiences were the product of distinct historical trajectories.”²¹⁹ By contrast, I suggest that the lesbian feminist conception of loving women bears far more resemblance to what we traditionally theorize as attempts to call forth a “counterpublic” than feminist and queer theorists have imagined. In fact, the debate over loving other women identifies several responsibilities to others that are fundamentally missing in existing conceptions of the public sphere, and would therefore require practitioners to attend to institutional contexts, knowledges, and audiences that have traditionally been marginalized.

In part two, then, I suggest that although this deeply political conception of love provided lesbian feminists with a theoretical diagnosis that makes space for coalitional negotiation over racial (and other) hierarchies within their emergent public, translating

²¹⁸ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that “love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public.” *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 51.

²¹⁹ Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 130.

this diagnosis into a set of lesbian feminist institutions proved a more difficult challenge than many expected. During late 1970s and early 1980s, lesbian feminists fiercely debated how the concrete roles of writing, publication, and audience might differently enable a “loving public” to come into being, to varied effect. Using two conversations in the 1976 issues of *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom* on the tasks of feminist publishing, I demonstrate that even writers committed to the idea of a loving counterpublic fell victim to papering over the hierarchies of legibility that arise when *certain* audiences claim to speak for *the* public. When theorists – even lesbian feminist ones – ignore these challenges, they risk not only failing to transform existing relations of power, but also foreclosing the very coalitional praxis that lesbian feminism hopes to sustain. However, in calling attention to this risk, some lesbian feminist writers, such as those found in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*, gesture towards a coalitional practice of interpersonal responsibility and negotiation that must, at all times, ground institution-building in emergent publics.

Finally, I show that the disjunctures involved in moving from theoretical diagnosis to institution-building, and from institution-building to coalitional praxis are exacerbated in the context of the academy, where the pressures of publication are different from the issues of publicity and audience with which lesbian feminists in the 70s and 80s grappled. Using the start-up documents of the journal *Hypatia*, I argue that we can see a shift towards needing to “resolve” tensions between the lesbian and feminist writing community, on the one hand, and the channels for recognition that are available to them, on the other. If discussions of “loving” cannot be read as attempts to establish a stable identity category, then, we also should not read the lesbian feminist counterpublic

as a stable, uncontested concept across the 1980s. Indeed, I show throughout this chapter that, on the one hand, the notion of a single lesbian feminist “counterpublic” premised on the idea of loving faced considerable conceptual, institutional, and political challenges throughout its existence as an organizing concept. On the other hand, however, I demonstrate that lesbian feminists tended to view these challenges as a way of strengthening, not threatening, the coalitional possibilities of the new audience they hoped to call forth.

Public Things: Authors, Institutions, Audiences

At its most basic, this chapter will argue that revisiting controversies over the politics lesbian feminist publishing reveals the limitations of queer theorists’ framework for understanding their historical relationship to lesbian feminism and illuminates some of the ways that lesbian feminists sought to encourage coalitional practices in their writing communities. Lesbian feminism, as I argued in my introduction and in Chapter 1, is typically criticized and rejected by contemporary queer theorists on the grounds that it relies on an essentialist identity claim and enforces a static conception of what it means to *be* a lesbian. There, I argued that queer theorists have argued that discussions about “being” involve an inherently conservative politics of naming, whereby any attempt to apply the name “lesbian” to a stable referent inevitably polices and excludes. However, in this chapter I will argue that this is the wrong way to think about the group “lesbian feminists;” instead, I want to suggest that we should think of lesbian feminism as a diffuse attempt to establish a new kind of public.

As Michael Warner has argued, *publics* are defined not by some shared identity but by their distinctive forms of address and structures of legibility. Unlike identity groups, which “select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of members,”²²⁰ a *public* must be called forth in a complex interplay between authors, institutions, and audiences. A public, Warner writes, “might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in [its] reflexivity by which an addressable object [say, “lesbians”] *is conjured into being* in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.”²²¹ In other words, where an identity category is (wrongly) presumed to *exist* prior to its naming, a public is *called into being* through a complex interplay between political discourses, institutions of dissemination, and anticipated audiences. It may seem artificial to insist on this distinction – after all, as Iris Young points out, social groups, too, do not exist in some concrete form separate from the relations they conjure in and through address.²²² But I draw this distinction to argue that, by and large, queer theorists – and political theorists more broadly – have failed to apprehend lesbian feminism as calling forth a distinctive kind of public.

Equally, however, this distinction is useful for understanding the ways that lesbian feminism brings political resources into view that are largely missed in contemporary debates over difference, publicity, and radical social change. For example, much of the debate over the politics of publicity in political theory centers around questions about how – or whether – to stabilize the inevitable differences, disagreements,

²²⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 75.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²²² Iris Marion Young, “Difference as a Political Resource,” *Democracy and Inclusion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82-121.

and dissonances between individual subjects in a democratic public.²²³ As I will show below, however, there is much more to the politics of publicity than the “fact” of plurality. In particular, I will suggest that it has been exceedingly difficult for political theorists to train their attention on the structural relations of power that inhere in public life. Although issues of power – who speaks *for* whom, which potential audiences are addressed and which are marginalized, how institutions and structures amplify or foreclose certain kinds of contestation or coalitional praxis – constantly circulate just below the surface of many theoretical accounts of publicity, these issues tend to recede from view when theorists interpret them as problems of plurality or difference. Thus, in addition to correcting the misperception that lesbian feminism is best conceptualized in an “identity” framework, I will make the case that lesbian feminists were, more than many mainstream political theorists, exceedingly attuned to relations of power that inhere in “publics and counterpublics.”

Before documenting how lesbian feminists in the 1980s conceptualized the challenges of power that inhere in publicity, then, let me spend a little time rehearsing how debates over publicity have typically unfolded. What follows is less the usual concerns of publicity as they have developed in the field of political theory than it is an account of some of the forgotten lessons about publicity that have continually been

²²³ This debate largely takes place by proxy. On the one hand, thinkers invested in “reconstructing” the normative principles that underlie democratic difference tend to turn to Habermas’ theory of communicative action; on the other, those concerned with the instabilities and unexpected effects of political communication tend to employ Hannah Arendt’s thesis that plurality is the defining feature of modernity. This proxy-debate has led to the idea that a comprehensive approach to the politics of publicity is coterminous with a reconciliation between Habermas and Arendt on the nature of the public sphere. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

marginalized in the discipline. In particular, I am here interested in the ways that disciplinary debates over the public sphere have marginalized and misrecognized not only some of the most difficult *political* questions about the ways that publics organize the messy and unstable relationships between audiences, institutions, and political practices, but also the ways that lesbian feminist accounts of publicity have uniquely brought these challenges to light.

According to Jürgen Habermas, who is widely credited with having conceptualized “the public sphere,” publicity in modern bourgeois society is a thing apart from other forms of political representation.²²⁴ Unlike forms of representation that claim a kind of mastery over the object being represented (as in, for example, the clergy’s claim to literally represent the authority of God), the public sphere is a way of calling forth a certain kind of critical *audience* for politics.²²⁵ Quite unlike the kind of mastery entailed in naming, representing, or directly ruling, in Habermas’ account the public sphere is a medium for speaking to, about, and for others. For Habermas, the public sphere emerged in the modern bourgeois context out of a need to differently address political audiences; namely, the emergence of a “reading public” which increasingly leveraged its attention and criticism to make claims on political authorities. Because of the constant circulation of commodities and news in the bourgeois period, political authority could not be

²²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Boston: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]).

²²⁵ Unlike Greek or Feudal conceptions of publicity, Habermas argues, the bourgeois public sphere depended on the rise of constant “traffic” in both commodities and news. Although it would take many years for the traffic in new to become the stuff of public concern, Habermas argues that the rise of a reading public would ultimately yield “a public sphere whose decisive mark was the published word.” *Structural Transformation*, 16.

articulated as natural, direct, and unassailable; instead, political authority began to be cast loose, subject to “a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion.”²²⁶ In this new form of political life, subjects are transformed into political audiences that are called forth as active participants in their relationship to authority.

If Habermas’ story sounds familiar, it is because certain parts of his account of the relationship between capitalism, reading, and the public sphere have become foundational in the field of political theory. However, I want to call attention at this point to a little-remembered lesson from *Structural Transformation*; namely, Habermas’ emphasis on the tension between the *multiplicity* of social and political positions during the rise of publicity and the idea of *the* public sphere. According to Habermas, on the one hand, the bourgeois public sphere was built on a rejection of domination or direct forms of power. Thus,

The bourgeois were private persons; as such they did not ‘rule.’ Their power claims against the public authority were thus not directed against the concentration of powers of command that ought to be ‘divided;’ instead, they undercut the principle on which existing rule was based. The principle of control that the bourgeois public opposed to the latter – namely, publicity – was intended to change domination as such.²²⁷

However, in reality, Habermas writes that the bourgeois rejection of “domination as such” depended on the fusing of the *particular* role of property holders with the *general* notion of “the” public. While the emergence of the public sphere went hand in hand with the emergence of a reading public and the notion of criticism, the very idea of “a” public

²²⁶ Ibid., 25-26.

²²⁷ Ibid., 28.

relies on the substitution of the voices, criticisms, and opinions of a particular subset of individuals who come to stand in for the whole:

The authorities addressed their promulgations to ‘the’ public, that is, in principle to all subjects. Usually they did not reach the ‘common man’ in this way, but at best the ‘educated classes.’ Along with the apparatus of the modern state, a new stratum of ‘bourgeois’ people arose which occupied a central position within the ‘public.’²²⁸

Thus, “The fully developed bourgeois public sphere,” Habermas writes, “was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple.”²²⁹ The public sphere, then, is not *only* a specific historical relationship between critical audiences, institutions of dissemination, and political authorities, although it certainly plays this important role. Habermas’ is a very specific lesson about the nature – and, indeed, the dangers – of speaking about the public sphere at all: when we discuss the historical or ideal relationships between audiences, institutions, and authority, we must always the abiding relations of power that inhere singular, undifferentiated claims about ‘the’ public.

This, of course, is not the standard reading of Habermas, which centers not on the themes of power and hierarchy but on issues of reason,²³⁰ deliberation,²³¹ and democratic

²²⁸ Ibid., 22-23.

²²⁹ Ibid., 56.

²³⁰ In *Democracy and Disagreement*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that reasoned deliberation can mitigate some of the problems of inequality that are exacerbated by mere “rhetoric.” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 134-136.

²³¹ Simone Chambers, for example, credits Habermas with having elaborated deliberation as a public good; Habermas, she writes, “links moral philosophy to everyday communicative practices.” *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12.

legitimacy.²³² Neither is it the commonplace way of thinking about the potential of publicity to incite new world-making practices.²³³ However, the implicit lessons of *Structural Transformation* - lessons about the risks of papering over the relations and hierarchies that exist within “the” public at the expense of marginalized voices – have not gone without considerable attention in recent decades, even as they have tended to continually recede from view.²³⁴ As Nancy Fraser reminds her readers, Habermas’ project is to examine “the rise and decline of a historically specific and limited form of the public sphere”²³⁵ that he describes as “a category of *bourgeois* society.” Following this intuition, Fraser argues that the notion of the “public sphere” is a kind of official story about the relationship of accountability that exists between modern individuals and their government, and that this story is meant to smooth over the frictions between the

²³² See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,” in which she writes that publicity is “a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity” and that “the institutions of this polity [must be] so arranged that what is considered the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals.” *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 69.

²³³ As I argued in the introduction, most contemporary political theorists approach the issue of “publicity” through the lens of Hannah Arendt, arguing that her account of persuasion and world-making ought to ground our understanding of publicity. See, for example, Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²³⁴ Most notable among theorists seeking to amplify the dimensions of Habermas’ work that deal directly with power is Iris Marion Young. In *Inclusion and Democracy*, for example, she engages the work of both Habermas and Nancy Fraser to make the case that “Those committed to democratic processes should reject political theories and practices [that] impose a unity on the public sphere that usually excludes or disadvantages some voices or perspectives. Democratic process ought to encourage an enable the organizing of multiple and contending discourses, forms of expression, and debates.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172.

²³⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 58.

ideals of equality and self-governance, on the one hand, and the persistence of political authority, on the other. In this official story, publicity is the means by which discourse binds publics to *certain* political expectations, forms of address, and channels of participation over others. If Habermas notices that, historically, the public sphere has appealed to a *particular* audience – educated, bourgeois men – Fraser’s work on the public sphere makes the secondary claim that a “post-bourgeois rethinking” of the public sphere would need to take into account a fuller array of audiences, institutions, and forms of knowledge that constitute other possible publics, both those existing and those yet to be called into being.

If one version of the public sphere – the “official” public sphere underwritten by the social contract – is but one of many competing “publics” in the modern age, then what are we to make of the fact that its anticipated audience, forms of address, and means of participation still dominate our political life today? Is it possible to repair or remake the public sphere in ways that shift the forms of political activity and association available to *all* members the public? For Fraser, the key to recognizing the limits of the official public sphere lies in acknowledging the irreducibly plural and contestatory nature of publicity itself: Habermas, she writes, “fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres.”²³⁶ Citing a range of historians focusing on the public activities of women and people of color, Fraser continues,

[These studies show] that, even in the absence of formal political incorporation through suffrage, there were a variety of ways of accessing public life and a multiplicity of public arenas. Thus, the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be *the* public. In fact, the historiography of Ryan and others demonstrates that

²³⁶ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 60-61.

the bourgeois public was never *the* public... there were competing publics from the start.”²³⁷

If Fraser is correct – that the notion of *the* public sphere is a way to ideologically obscure a more diverse array of political audiences – then she recommends that those concerned with “participatory parity” look for the kinds of “arrangements that permit contestation among a plurality of competing publics,”²³⁸ paying special attention to the “protocols of persuasion” that inhere across different “subaltern counterpublics.”²³⁹ Doing so, she argues, “would allow us to theorize the range of possible relations among such publics, thereby expanding our capacity to envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy.”²⁴⁰

What’s curious about Fraser’s argument is that although her early engagement with Habermas highlights how the official public sphere enables “powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday life contexts and in official public spheres,” she does not pursue this issue as a matter of injustice in her later works. Like Habermas, Fraser declines to imagine what it might mean to *differently* organize the institutions or discourses of “actually existing democracy,” and instead turns to matters of inclusion and incorporation, arguing that provincializing “the public sphere” will lead to new ways of formulating common

²³⁷ Ibid., 61. As Young notes, theoretical work published since Fraser’s landmark essay has advanced our knowledge of what such “subaltern counterpublics” might look like considerably. See, for example, Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” *Public Culture* 7 (1994), 195-223; Maria Pia Lara, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

²³⁸ Ibid., 68.

²³⁹ Ibid., 69.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 77.

meaning within a universal democratic context. Fraser, like Habermas, thus allows the issue of *power* in the public sphere to recede in favor of a normative model based on redistribution and recognition.²⁴¹

If Fraser, like Habermas, allows us to “[leave] aside the *plebian* public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process,”²⁴² scholars in fields outside of mainstream political theory have attempted to keep the relations of power that inhere in ‘the’ public sphere in view.²⁴³ While queer theorists, for example, largely agree with Fraser that a more robust conception of “the public sphere” ought to acknowledge the existence of multiple publics, they emphasize the constraints on these publics that render *certain* public idioms and forms of address legible while repressing, policing, and excluding others. This process requires us to understand the relationship between the forms of address that accompany the creation of publics and the institutions of that disseminate and publicize ideas. “Publics,” writes Warner, “[lack] any institutional being;”²⁴⁴ they are conjured in language and thereby require, at least in theory, only the “active uptake” of discourses through the attention of individuals. However, such “active uptake” cannot happen on its own – discourses need institutions of circulation such as presses, markets, conferences, media, and other means of circulation. Moreover, argues

²⁴¹ See Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review* (1995); 68-98.

²⁴² Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, xviii.

²⁴³ One exceptional example is Arlette Farge’s *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995 [1992]). The book gives an alternative account of the formation of public opinion – not from the perspective of the educated bourgeois with which Habermas concerns himself, but in the actions and communications of the “so-called uneducated common people in the eighteenth century before the Revolution,” 2.

²⁴⁴ Warner, 88.

Warner, while all manner of publics and counterpublics may exist simultaneously in any given political context, as Fraser suggests, the available institutions of circulation have incredible control over the ability of writers to *actually* constitute publics in practice. As Warner explains,

although the premise of self-organizing discourse is necessary to the peculiar cultural artifact that we call a public, it is contradicted both by the material limits – means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects, social conditions of access – and by internal ones, including the need to presuppose forms of intelligibility already in place, as well as the social closure entailed by any selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so on.²⁴⁵

Warner here points to two conditions of publicity: the existence of material (I will argue *institutional*) means of production and distribution, and discursive norms of legibility and closure. Like Fraser, he argues that the notion of the “official” public emerged through a unique historical process, whereby the discursive norms of bourgeois publicity were strengthened and bolstered by the material means of distributing and disseminating these ideas. However, unlike Fraser, who suggests that by opening democratic debate to a plurality of different protocols of persuasion, Warner argues that such a pluralization will not be so easy. Indeed, he writes, once *certain* forms of publicity become entangled with the dominant means of distribution and associated with politics *as such*, other ways of addressing audiences become profoundly less legible and persuasive: hence, “the dimensions of language singled out in the ideology of rational-critical discussion acquire prestige and power. Publics more overtly oriented in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language... lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state.”²⁴⁶ According to Warner, then, the ideology that makes it

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 72-73.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 116.

possible for bourgeois publicity to stand in for *the* public sphere is not a matter of plurality, but of power: “Some publics,” he writes, “are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.”²⁴⁷

The political task, then, is not just to promote multiple “subaltern counterpublics,” but to enable a practice of disruption that attempts to transform the possibilities of “relating to strangers” on terms *other* than those demanded by the state. “As it happens,” Warner writes, “an understanding of queerness has been developing in recent decades that is suited to just this necessity. A culture is developing in which intimate relations and the sexual body can in fact be understood as projects for transformation among strangers.”²⁴⁸ The queer counterpublic that Warner describes – one in which “embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue”²⁴⁹ – is meant not only to *participate* in the process of democratic meaning-making, as Fraser recommends, but is more deeply transformative:

Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. *Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.*²⁵⁰

For Warner, then, certain counterpublics promote the possibility of relating to others on new, unexpected terms, and are thereby particularly well-suited to disrupt the coterminous relationship between dominant discourses and the presumption of unity.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 117.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., emphasis mine.

Along with his co-author Lauren Berlant, Warner argues in ‘Sex in Public,’ for instance, that sexuality – and, in particular, *queer* sexuality – is the grounds on which to trouble the usual discursive modes in which certain audiences become synonymous with “the” public sphere. By calling upon the deviant, monstrous, messy, and otherwise *queer* activities that make up sexual counterpublics, Berlant and Warner argue that such activities

intended non-heteronormative worlds because they refused to pretend that privacy was their ground; because they were forms of sociability that delinked money and family from the scene of the good life; because they made sex the consequence of public mediations and collective self-activity in a way that made for unpredicted pleasures; because, in turn, they attempted to make a context of support for their practices; because their pleasures were not purchased by a redemptive pastoralism of sex or by mandatory amnesia about failure, shame, and aversion.”²⁵¹

By revealing the discursive terms that make up the practices of “the” public sphere (privacy, individuality, money, family) as merely ideological, Berlant and Warner thus argue that queer sexualities signal new ways of being that have, until now, remained marginal, subaltern, unrealized. For Berlant and Warner, “queer commentary has been animated by a sense of belonging to a discourse world that only partly exists yet.”²⁵² They go on to argue in “What can Queer Theory Teach us About X?” that the work of calling such a “discourse world” into being

aspires to create publics, publics that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways; publics that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle; publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, hoped for... Queer publics make available different understandings of membership at different times, and membership in them is more a matter of aspiration than it is the expression of an identity or a history.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Ibid., 208.

²⁵² Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What can Queer Theory Teach us About X?” *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 344.

²⁵³ Ibid.

Note here how the “aspiration” of queer publicity is explicitly contrasted with “the expression of *an* identity or *a* history.” Berlant and Warner thus suggest that the politics of *calling forth* queer publics, by virtue of being more dynamic spaces of difference and contestation, are at odds with a more brittle politics of *calling upon* pre-existing identities, shared histories, and oppositional frames.

In short, then, political theorists have continually attempted to frame questions of publicity in terms of the relation between the official story of *the* public sphere and its “counterpublics” – that is, in terms of the *relations of power* by which certain potential audiences can presume that theirs is a universal audience, and of the various marginal audiences counterpublics *might* call forth instead. For queer theorists like Warner, conceptualizing these counterpublics as part of a pluralistic project tends to ignore the power of legibility, a power that inheres in the coterminous relationship between dominant ideas and the means of their dissemination. For queer theorists, then, *counterpublics* involve not only an effort to persuade, but to transform; not only to make claims on authority, but to disrupt and subvert the way authority is distributed in the first place. However, as my reading of Warner and Berlant’s ‘Sex in Public’ suggests, queer theorists have tended to make their claims about disruption through and against their presumption that, until queer sexuality, no form of publicity has harnessed the capacity for such a transformative approach to public life. In the sections that follow, then, I will argue both that this presumption is inaccurate, and that it unnecessarily limits our capacity for imagining the ways in which the very discursive and material transformations that queer theorists advocate might occur.

Love in Public

Indeed, however much queer theorists insist that queer publics exceed 1980s lesbian feminism by raising the issue of *publicity* rather than *identity*, their basic claims – that lesbian feminists were primarily concerned with defining, once and for all, what it means to “be” a lesbian – cut against the grain of lesbian feminist writing at the time. Far from emphasizing the challenges associated with naming or the presumption of unity, many of the most prominent works of the 1980s evoke much different political challenges – namely, the challenges associated with precisely the same the relations of power between political speech, institutions, and audiences with which thinkers like Berlant and Warner are concerned – that inhere in publicity.

Like queer theory, the most fundamental animating impulse of lesbian feminism is the desire to approach these questions with a sense that the “official” public is not the only possible way to call forth political audiences, and that the institutions that secure the official public are not the only possible means of connecting strangers within a public to one another. Like Berlant and Warner’s emphasis on developing practices of publicity that promote new ways of “belonging to discourse world[s] that only partly [exist],” lesbian feminism rejects as ideological the form of public address secured by the “sexual contract;” moreover, they do so in order to reclaim the political, institutional, and discursive possibilities of publicity for those whose presence in public life has historically been erased. Lesbian feminism, viewed in this context, is not at all an attachment to mastery through naming which much must be relinquished in the name of critical desire. Quite the opposite: as I will suggest below, lesbian feminists imagined the sort of disruption and transformation of the “official” public sphere in ways that, at times,

exceed the exclusive focus on public sexuality that animates queer theory. Lesbian feminist politics as *publicity* moves, instead, towards a concern for the kinds of institutions, audiences, and hierarchies that inhere in “loving” – that is, in the practice of speaking for, to, and with others.

Consider, for example, a text that looms particularly large in queer theorists’ depictions of lesbian feminism as a conservative attempt to install and police a stable identity category: Marilyn Frye’s (in)famous essay “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power.” The essay, which appeared first in *Sinister Wisdom*’s sixth issue in 1978, later appeared in Frye’s 1983 volume *The Politics of Reality*. In both contexts, debate over Frye’s conception of lesbian separatism does *not* occur as part of a discussion about “being” a lesbian, however much theorists in the 1990s have imposed this interpretation of her texts. In the preface to the collection, for instance, Frye writes that the primary goal of the essays is to consider her own situatedness in a set of feminist audiences, including the academic audience of the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) and the wider lesbian feminist audience of *Sinister Wisdom* contributors and readers. “In most cases,” Frye writes of the audiences that informed the essays in *The Politics of Reality*,

the audience I imagined as I wrote was that provided by the Society for Women in Philosophy, usually the Midwestern Division. The women of that Society are a wonderful audience: attentive and excitable; critical; aesthetically sensitive, philosophically sophisticated, and politically conscious; supportive, angry, stubborn, loving and logical. What more could a writer ask?²⁵⁴

Immediately, Frye answers the (not-so-rhetorical) question. What more could a writer ask than a sensitive academic audience? “Publication, love and money, of course.” She goes

²⁵⁴ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1983); viii.

on to argue that beyond SWIP, she saw her audience as contributors and readers of *Sinister Wisdom*: indeed, the existence of *Sinister Wisdom* was not only a publication, but a specific kind of public – one that “cheerfully published what was too feminist (not to mention too lesbian) for philosophy journals and too philosophical for lesbian feminist journals” and that therefore “was vital to me, for it meant that whatever I was working on *could* be published. I am indebted to these women for their *hearing me into speech*.”²⁵⁵ For Frye, the activity of writing – as a feminist or otherwise – requires an audience, a set of institutions to disseminate ideas, and a fluency in a shared political discourse: in short, it is a form of *publicity*.

In “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power,” then, Frye turns to the question of why separatism, the notion that feminist (and particularly lesbian feminist) women might knowingly and willingly *exclude* men as an essential part of their audience, is “so basic and so sinister, so exciting and so repellent.”²⁵⁶ For the first half of “Reflections,” Frye argues that part of the problem with separatism is that hierarchies between men and women require constant male access to women’s bodies, labor, emotional energy, and so on. Thus, to physically “separate” from men entails denying them the access on which their “parasitism” is premised. For Frye, this dimension of separation is, to be sure, a profound threat to what she calls “patriarchal loyalists.” However, in the less-cited (and less well-understood) second half of the essay, Frye turns to a different question much more aligned with the questions of audience, publicity, and writing that animate this

²⁵⁵ Ibid., viii.

²⁵⁶ Marilyn Frye, “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power,” *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 96. See also, *Sinister Wisdom* 6, 1978; 31.

chapter. Might separatism, in establishing an audience of women who are intentionally “unintelligible” to men, provide lesbian feminists a means to deny men another kind of access, this time to the “semantic authority” to define lesbian relationships and the politics they incite? Might lesbian feminists, in a word, constitute themselves as a transformative counterpublic? In an extended footnote, Frye writes that physical separation – the creation of a new kind of audience – is a means to a more important end; namely, the “new being and meaning which are being created now by lesbianfeminists [sic]... the semantic authority [which we], collectively, can and do define with effect.”²⁵⁷

For Frye, it becomes clear, the question of separation is not about escaping from men or living an “alternative lifestyle,” as critics of separatism have often assumed. Rather, separatism for Frye is about creating the conditions in which a radically new kind of audience might be called forth. Like the queer audience whose sexual practices transgress the norms of the “official” public sphere in Berlant and Warner’s work, Frye’s imagined audience must be practically distinct from the current institutions and discourses that shape political life in order to create space for new meanings and relationships to emerge. “Women generally are not the people who do the defining,” she writes,

and we cannot from our isolation and powerlessness simply commence saying different things than others say and make it stick. There is a humpty dumpty problem in that. *But we are able to arrogate definition to ourselves when we re-pattern access.* Assuming control of access, we draw new boundaries and create new roles and relationships. This, though it causes some strain, puzzlement and hostility, is to a fair extent within the scope of individuals and small gangs, as outright verbal redefinition is not, at least in the first instance.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Ibid., SW, 37; *Politics of Reality*, 105.

²⁵⁸ SW, 38; *Politics of Reality*, 106. Emphasis mine.

We might notice, then, how different the question of separatism in this essay appears from the standard criticism of lesbian separatism as a way to discursively control an identity category, police its boundaries, and exclude certain women from its ranks. Here, separatism is an explicit attempt to call forth a radically new kind of *audience* by creating space for a new political infrastructure, and to claim a form of self-determination over the written and spoken word that marks the refusal to be understood on terms other than one's own.

Moreover, however, Frye's conception of publicity is just as attuned to the constant need to attend to relations of power that inhere in publics – that is, to the risk that a particular potential audience may come to stand in for 'the' public – as is Berlant and Warner's queer sexual counterpublics. For many contemporary theorists, perhaps, Frye's emphasis on separatism as a way to transgress "official" public norms feels more brittle, traditional, or normative than the more obviously fluid emphasis on queer "sex in public." To be sure, the notion of a lesbian feminist counterpublic has, at no point, been invulnerable from important critiques of the internal relations of power that it might reify. However, unlike much of mainstream political theory which has continually allowed questions of power to recede from view, the constant vulnerability to leaving power intact is *precisely* the political question of publicity for lesbian feminists.

In fact, deep, difficult conversations about these risks of power within counterpublics like lesbian feminism took place throughout the 1980s, particularly around the issue of racism and racial marginalization within lesbian separatist communities. One such exchange over the constant risk of power took unfolded in a tense debate in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*, in which readers responded to an Adrienne Rich

essay on whether separatism can overcome the invisible racial assumptions that underlie many separatist communities.²⁵⁹ On the one hand, Rich (who, as I suggested in Chapter 1, spent much of the 1980s attempting to respond to the challenges to lesbian feminism laid out by women of color and in conversation with thinkers like Audre Lorde) clearly lays out the risks of reifying racist hierarchies within lesbian separatist communities: after citing the Combahee River Collective's statement against separatism,²⁶⁰ she writes

Some questions that come to mind:

For many white women, as Vicki Gabriner notes, there is a horrible after-taste to the 1960s – having to do with the leftist cult of masculinity and violence and its usage of women in the name of 'sexual liberation' – which is instantly evoked by the mention of 'coalition politics.' This may have nothing to do with biological determinism. If the white lesbian/feminist chooses not to work in coalitions with men, does she also become unable to grasp the different choices of the woman of color, under white racism, to maintain survival connections with her racial community of origin – males included? Can the complexity and courage of each position be honored, its radicalism understood?

*Does lesbian separatist politics imply a stereotype, a conformity which has no use for difference and which is, therefore, stereotypically racist?*²⁶¹

Here, Rich is pointing to the real necessity of confronting question of power that I have suggested risks receding from view: can a counterpublic call a new audience into being without reducing 'the' public to a single point of view?

²⁵⁹ Adrienne Rich, "Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?" *Sinister Wisdom* 18, (1982): 83-91.

²⁶⁰ The full citation reads: "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men, and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors... As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race," cited in Rich, "Notes for a Magazine," 87.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 87. Emphasis mine.

Two issues later, apparently in response to the strong and varied responses to her essay, *SW* co-editors Rich and Michelle Cliff published two back-to-back responses to the piece on separatism. Barbara Smith (whose words in the Combahee River Statement animated Rich's questions) responded by arguing that, in reality, lesbian feminism had *not* adequately staved off the risks that Rich identified – they had failed, in particular, to grapple with the ways that physical separations can be enabled by and allied with racial segregation: “As a nonseparatist woman of color and an activist feminist and Lesbian,” she writes,

my criticisms of separatism have come from experiencing action or nonaction, from observing how separatists actually have functioned politically in the world. I agree that words and beliefs can influence what we do, but the words are not as significant as the practice they encourage and inspire. Many women of color, including myself, who are strong feminists have observed how a Lesbian separatist stance has led to an isolated, single-issued understanding and practice of politics, which ignores the range of oppressions that women experience. No amount of developing definitions will change what Lesbian separatism has come to mean in practice, although altered practice could very well change the connotation of the term “Lesbian separatist.”²⁶²

While Frye's account of separatism emphasizes the seizure of the institutions and relationships through which political discourse circulates so as to call forth a new kind of public, Smith here argues that in practice separatism has often functioned in the reverse. She notes, with considerable disappointment, that separatism has often meant deciding on the range of acceptable meanings of separatism in advance, thereby foreclosing the possibility of radically altered social relationships. In effect, Smith argues, separatism had fallen victim to the same risks associated with power in ‘the’ official public sphere.

²⁶² Barbara Smith, “Response: February 3, 1982,” *Sinister Wisdom* 20 (1982): 100-101.

As if to prove Smith's point by decidedly failing to understand the implications of the new kind of audience Frye advocates, another *SW* reader responds to Rich's essay with the following charge:

Why are we, in most communities in the u.s., expected to compromise our Separatist principles and work on co-ed events and campaigns, by Lesbians who would never dream of compromising their humanist principles to work on Lesbian-only or wimmin-only projects? It's time for non-Separatist Lesbians to start explaining yourselves. What does it mean to not be a Separatist in "our" movement? What is your strategy for the defeat of patriarchy over the long haul? What is the goal of your struggle? Can you honor the choice of Separatist wimmin of color not to work with men? Is it racist not to be a Separatist; not to withdraw your support from patriarchy, not to fight for an anti-racist Lesbian-identified culture?²⁶³

Perhaps it is in response to such dramatically reductive reactions on the part of some lesbian separatists that makes it possible for queer writers like Eve Sedgwick to associate lesbian separatism with "minoritizing" definitions of sexuality that promote the "essentialist, third-sex, civil rights models" that she takes to task.²⁶⁴ In fact, there is a good deal of truth to the idea that separatism never accomplished the kind of radical transformation in the relationships between author-writers, audiences, and institutions that Frye and Rich imagined in the late 1970s, and that, as Smith suggests, lesbian separatism was never an *automatic* solution to the problems that plague the traditional public sphere. However, I would insist that despite the political failures of physical separatism (as well as its failures to definitively settle other challenges that I return to below), something far more interesting than the policing of a conservative identity

²⁶³ Sidney Spinster, "Response," *Sinister Wisdom* 18, (1982): 105.

²⁶⁴ Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); 88. Tellingly, Sedgwick presents this spurious association in the form of a schematic table, in which she displays the essentialist disposition of separatism as one half of "the impasse of gender definition" out of which queer theorists will have to find their way. (90)

category is at work in calls for a reclamation of the institutions and audiences that make up the feminist public.

Indeed, while Frye's essay on separatism is today far and away her most remembered work, its political and conceptual implications can really only be understood fully in relation to her work on what existing in such a transformative public would entail. In the essay "In and Out of Harm's Way," for instance, Frye argues that the point of considering separation is decidedly not to understand some essential state of "being" a woman or to police or punish women who are not separatists, however much some separatists might try to push separatist thought in this direction.²⁶⁵ In fact, these reductive, policing activities are precisely what Frye criticizes as "seeing with an arrogant eye," meaning that they participate in establishing "an imagined community of ultimate harmony and perfect agreement that we dare to think it possible to make meaning."²⁶⁶ This sort of "arrogant perception," Frye notes, is precisely the kind of meaning-making that underpins the "official" public sphere – it is the kind of perception which allows the bourgeois public to "see with arrogant eyes which organize everything seen with reference to themselves and their own interests" and to "[coerce] the objects of his

²⁶⁵ Indeed, today some "lesbian feminist" groups such as "Get the L Out," which staged a protest against "lesbian erasure" at the London Pride parade in 2018, promote deeply essentialist and inherently exclusionary ideas in the name of lesbian separatism. Angela C. Wild, a leader of the group, has argued, citing Adrienne Rich as inspiration, that "We need to maintain the unequivocal rights of women to have our segregated spaces on the basis of our sex, not 'gender identity' [...] Lesbians are attracted to other women on the basis of their *sex*, not their 'gender identity,' yet men claiming to be Lesbians insist we accept them as sexual partners on the basis of their 'gender identity.' It is this new definition of 'Lesbian' that we reject." See Meghan Murphy, "Interview: Angela C. Wild of #GetTheLOut on Pride in London and Lesbian Erasure," *Feminist Current*, July 17, 2019. <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2018/07/17/interview-angela-c-wild-getthelout-pride-london-lesbian-erasure/>

²⁶⁶ Frye, *The Politics of Reality*; 81.

perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes.”²⁶⁷ However, Frye – like Rich and Smith above – also suggests that *lesbian feminism*, like the official public sphere, is susceptible to this kind of arrogant imposition of a single point of view. In a word, “arrogant perception” is precisely what allows *an audience* to imagine itself as *the public*; this form of perception, then, is politically toxic for those, like lesbian feminists, seeking to transform the hierarchies which systematically marginalize and erase certain audiences. Frye argues that not only does this kind of politics fail to bring about the radical self-determination she sees as the central task of separatism, but that it in fact “brings us into an arrogance of our own, for we make it a prerequisite for our construction of meaning that other women be what we need them to be to constitute the harmonious community of agreement we require.”²⁶⁸ Put simply, separatism for Frye represents a politics explicitly opposed to the dynamics of policing and identity closure with which it is normally associated.

Instead of “seeing with an arrogant eye,” then, Frye argues that lesbian feminism is a way of calling forth a qualitatively different kind of public – a public opposed in principle and in practice to precisely the kind of arrogating policing that, at present, defines the official public sphere. This new public, Frye writes, would be premised on seeing others with whom one is in association with a “loving eye.” “We who would love women,” she writes, “who would change ourselves and change the world so that it is possible to love women well, we need to imagine the possibilities for what women might be if we lived lives free of the material and perceptual forces which subordinate women

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 67.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 81.

to men.”²⁶⁹ In short, by refusing to participate in the institutions, norms, and discourses that promote “arrogant” publics, lesbian feminists might call forth a new way of relating to one another altogether. Frye’s “loving” public requires, in her view, an understanding of one’s place in the *relations* (racial and otherwise) that make up the public without overdetermining them:

The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention... What is required is that one know what are one’s interests, desires and loathings, one’s projects, hungers, fears and wishes, and that one know what is and what is not determined by these. In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one’s own interests from those of others and of knowing where one’s self leaves off and another begins.... Some of us are taught we can have everything, some are taught we can have nothing. Either way we will acquire a great wanting... [Seeing with the loving eye] is a discipline of knowing and owning the wanting: identifying it, claiming it, knowing its scope, and through all this, knowing its distance from the truth.²⁷⁰

Lesbian feminism thus requires understanding that loving is a process, a *negotiation*, in order to make a radical break from the kinds of political relationships that make up the contemporary world. For Frye, this kind of love becomes possible only when feminists create new public institutions, audiences, and discourses – that is, when they inaugurate a qualitatively and materially new kind of public life.

The idea of a “loving” public may today appear strange or sentimental in relation to queer theory’s emphasis on non-normative sexualities (“tweaking, thwacking, thumping, sliming, and rubbing,” as Berlant and Warner put it) as the foundation of a new public practice. Indeed, Michael Warner argues in *The Trouble with Normal* that, especially in queer politics, love stifles the directly political implications of sexual

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 76.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 75.

transgression in its turn away from conflict and persuasion: The “notion of pure love, like so much else in contemporary U.S. politics,” he writes,

is an image of sentimental privacy. Love, it says, is beyond criticism and beyond the judgments of the law. Where law adjudicates conflict and competing claims, *love speaks an inner truth, in a space where there is no conflict, no politics...* I would argue that any politics based on such a sentimental rhetoric of privacy is not only a false idealization of love and coupling, it is an increasingly powerful way of distracting citizens from the real, conflicted, and unequal conditions governing their lives, and that it serves to reinforce the privilege of those who already find it easiest to imagine their lives as private.²⁷¹

For Warner’s co-author Lauren Berlant, another thinker whose influence has profoundly shaped the way that we read arguments about “love” today, while love isn’t *apolitical* it is too ethically and politically ambivalent to serve as a way to separate “good love (narcissism) from good love (openness to transformation)” or to “imagine a social and affectual world organized by processes of being-with and not profiting-from.”²⁷² Rather, she writes, love is

one of the few situations where we desire to have patience for what isn’t working, and affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence. This is the main upside of making love a properly political concept, it seems to me. A form of affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment.²⁷³

To the extent that frameworks like Warner’s and Berlant’s have shaped our view of lesbian feminist conceptions of love, then, it is impossible to see the ways that this concept circulated across magazines, journals, and conversations as a direct rebuke to the kinds of power relationships that inhere in public life.

²⁷¹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 100.

²⁷² Lauren Berlant, “A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26 vol. 4 (2011): 684.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 685-686.

But if “love” strikes us today as too apolitical or, at best, too affectively ambivalent to serve as a foundation for a new kind of public life, it would not have appeared so in the 1980s. Indeed, debates about the radical possibilities of “loving” publics – and the kinds of institutional and discursive changes they would require – were extraordinarily common in the period, particularly in dealing with issues of difference and hierarchy within the burgeoning lesbian feminist public. In her response to Frye’s conception of what such a “loving eye” would entail, for example, Maria Lugones highlights the idea that women – even lesbians – can be “arrogant perceivers,” who fail to cast a loving eye towards other women, particularly “across racial and cultural boundaries.”²⁷⁴ For Lugones, part of what it means to be marginalized is being obligated to speak to audiences that refuse to see with a loving eye. In their hostility, such audiences – whether they are made up of men, white lesbians, or straight women of color – prevent the open-ended negotiations about how to transform persistent relations of power that loving publics require to come into being. Lugones argues that “one of the aspects of this failure... is a complex failure of love in the failure to identify with another woman, the failure to see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself.”²⁷⁵ At the same time, she suggests that in seeking institutions and discourses in which such failures would be worked through, it becomes possible to imagine that

I am incomplete and unreal without other women. I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave, their servant... We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid,

²⁷⁴ Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2.2 (1987): 5.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

visible, integrated; we are lacking. So traveling to each other's 'worlds' would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other.²⁷⁶

In a word, Lugones writes, despite the challenges of calling forth audiences in which loving – and not arrogance – is the condition of engagement, such is the goal of lesbian feminism which “is purposefully and healthily still up in the air, in the process of becoming.”²⁷⁷ It is not enough for lesbian feminists to claim that their love is transgressive and therefore transformative: “Love has to be rethought,” she writes, “*made anew*.”²⁷⁸

Lugones is by no means alone in taking up the possibility of developing loving relationships to characterize the political goals of lesbian feminism. In her preface to *This Bridge Called my Back*, for example, Cherríe Moraga writes that the book itself is a form of faith in such loving relationships – not “some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts, [but a] believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives.”²⁷⁹ The strategies of lesbian feminism, Moraga writes, are the strategies of the loving eye: they inhere in “how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend.”²⁸⁰ Later in the volume, Barbara Smith writes that an anti-racist lesbian feminism would require attention to “who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 7. Emphasis mine.

²⁷⁹ Cherríe Moraga, “Preface,” *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Anzaldúa and Moraga. (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983 [1981]), xviii.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., xxviii.

face you can touch.”²⁸¹ For Audre Lorde, too, the “loving” public is one that is neither unified nor fragmented, but is rather creative, contradictory, transformative, and ever-vigilant about the risks of power involved in calling new publics into being: defining the political uses of “the erotic” not in terms of disruptive sex, but as “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person,” Lorde argues that this sharing – one might say love – “forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”²⁸² Like Frye’s and Lugones’ insistence that only a loving eye can transform relations defined by arrogance, Lorde argues that the erotic is deeply transformative: “Only now,” she writes in her essay “Uses of the Erotic,”

I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic’s electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.²⁸³

In the end, then, the conception of a new lesbian feminist audience that proliferated during the 1980s is deeply tied to the principle “of loving other women” as one undertakes the process of speaking for, about, and with others, but which also seeks to keep the persistent threat of power – the risk that *an* audience can come to define itself as *the* public – in view. Where mainstream political theorists have tended to allow this political challenge to recede from view, then, lesbian feminists have expended considerable energy trying to center this political problem and to separate from the

²⁸¹ Ibid., 123.

²⁸² Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” *Sister Outsider*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]); 56.

²⁸³ Ibid., 59.

institutions that allow us to ignore, minimize, or misrecognize it. As Lugones puts it, despite the very real challenges of loving across racial divides, in calling forth an audience capable of and committed to keeping the challenge of loving relations in view, lesbian feminism “[suggests] *disloyalty* to arrogant perceivers, including the arrogant perceiver in ourselves, and to their constructions of women.”²⁸⁴

“Does it Brush Before Bedtime?” The Dilemmas of Feminist Publishing

To the extent that queer theorists have misrecognized lesbian feminism as an attempt to name an identity category rather than to call forth a new kind of public, then, I am suggesting that this misrecognition has meant that they largely fail to acknowledge the complex and deeply political concerns that shaped the feminist 1980s. In particular, by characterizing lesbian feminism as merely an attempt to police an identity category, queer theorists (and political theorists more generally) fail to understand the degree to which questions about separatism and love between women animated lesbian feminists’ “disloyalty” not only to mainstream forms of affect, but also to the political institutions of the official public sphere. As I argued in the section above, lesbian feminists organized their disloyalty not around the dynamics of sex and sexuality, as Berlant and Warner suggest, but around the principle of *loving* – that is, around the difficult negotiations required when one speaks to, for, and with others. The dynamics of loving relationships as an attempt to call forth a new kind of public are undoubtedly irreducible to the politics of naming that the queer theorists impose on this era. Instead, as I have been suggesting,

²⁸⁴ Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” 18. Emphasis mine.

the responsibilities entailed in a loving public require close attention to risks of power that inhere in constituting a new public. It is only in considering how lesbian feminists sought to center and take on these risks that we can understand the political complexity of an idea like separatism.

However, in sketching the contours of emergent notions such as the loving public, by no means do I want to suggest that matters of publicity were easily solved by simply reconceptualizing the terms on which members of this counterpublic ought to relate. In this section, then, I return to a different set of challenges to “the loving public” – namely, the challenges that arise when lesbian feminists attempted to translate concepts like the loving public into practical public-building institution such as presses, publishers, and journals. Here, I focus in particular on discussions of feminist publication in *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom* to demonstrate that lesbian feminists share a concern with the practical challenges with which they were faced as they attempted to practice disloyalty to institutions and discourses that make up the “official” public sphere. I turn to these discussions to show that however much theoretical notions like “the loving public” relied on an understanding of disloyalty or separation from the mainstream institutions of publicity, deep and abiding ambiguities about *how* lesbians ought to move away from these institutions remained at the forefront of conversation throughout the period.

In 1976 – two years before Marilyn Frye published her writing on separatism in *Sinister Wisdom* – June Arnold published her essay “Feminist Presses & Feminist Politics” in *Quest*. Arnold, who co-founded the lesbian feminist press *Daughters* in 1971, was deeply involved in the on-the-ground debates over feminist publicity; in fact, her essay, which was written “with the help and criticism” of such prominent lesbian

feminists as Wendy Cadden,²⁸⁵ Judy Grahn,²⁸⁶ Parke Bowman,²⁸⁷ Casey Czarnek²⁸⁸ and Colletta Reid,²⁸⁹ received considerable attention in the lesbian feminist writing community for the clear distinctions she drew between being complicit the institutions of the “official” public sphere and the task of material separation on the part of the emergent lesbian feminist counterpublic. Importantly, however, Arnold sees the tasks of “feminist presses and feminist politics” as coterminous; in short, she sees the task of separating entirely from the “male press” as essential to shifting the terms of public meaning-making and to creating new kinds of political relationships. However, as the spirited debate over separatism in the work of Frye, Rich, Smith, and Lugones might suggest, translating the transformative goals of a separatist public into institutions that would promote coalition-building would not be as easy as Arnold hoped.

The essay opens with Arnold celebrating the fact that the feminist “communications network has grown both up and out. There are now more than a hundred and fifty feminist presses or journals in over thirty states,” she writes:

Including women’s book stores, we have created a circle of media control with every link covered: a woman writes an article or book, a woman typesets it, a woman illustrates and lays it out, a woman prints it, a woman’s journal reviews it,

²⁸⁵ Wendy Cadden was Judy Grahn’s partner and an active member in the lesbian feminist organizations in the Bay Area during the 1970s. Together with Grahn, Cadden was a founding member of the group Gay Women’s Liberation.

²⁸⁶ Judy Grahn is the author of many important texts and poems in lesbian feminism, including the 1969 manifesto “Lesbians as Women.”

²⁸⁷ Parke Bowman was June Arnold’s long-time partner and co-founder of Diana Press.

²⁸⁸ Czarnek was another co-editor of Diana Press, along with Arnold, Bowman, and Charlotte Bunch.

²⁸⁹ Reid is the author of “Coming Out in the Women’s Movement,” an essay that details how the experience of coming out as *both* a lesbian and a feminist radicalized her understanding of basic social institutions such as child care, heterosexuality, and ‘women’s work.’ *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975).

a woman's bookstore sells it, and women read it – from Canada to Mexico and coast to coast.²⁹⁰

For Arnold, creating “a circle of media control” that rejects the institutions that underpin mainstream publicity – as she puts it, “[seizing] control of communications” – is “the first thing any revolutionary group does when taking over a government.”²⁹¹ Material separation from the institutions that sustain the mainstream reading public, according to Arnold, is important for two reasons. First, it shifts the material dependencies that women writers experience in relation to the press – for example, she writes, the existence of a women's “communications network” means that women no longer depend on male presses to gain access to existing audiences, financial compensation, and even the status of being considered “legitimate writers.” Second, however, Arnold insists that the very existence of feminist political consciousness relies in important ways on its distance from the demands of mainstream meaning-making:

There are women who don't understand what it was like to write a novel or a poem or an essay and know, even before you began, that you had to pre-program your mind to work from male values (if you weren't already programmed by life) or you might as well save your pencil for the grocery list. If you were very clever and managed to include your voice inside their language *and* get published, you were misreviewed by male papers and your work soon went out of print for economic (political) reasons. The words of earlier feminists were lost because they were the property of male publishers who easily avoided reprinting them.²⁹²

Arnold, just like Frye, thus insists that “separatism” is less an attempt to define and police a certain understanding of the category “lesbian,” and instead calls attention to the fact that “the finishing press has big stake (survival) in keeping middle-class values around.”

To promote *lesbian feminist* values such as those entailed in the loving public, then,

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 18.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., 19.

lesbians “should check carefully to see just what values are being reinforced by the women who achieve the finishers’ status.”²⁹³ Arnold argues, for example, that the finishers’ presses demand that authors articulate political ideas in terms that fit easily into existing frameworks and formulas. “In contrast,” she continues,

a simple, unvalidated, dust-jacketless volume by an unknown name, on a subject not always immediately clear (because it is not yesterday’s idea), in language which reaches out to explore new territory, puts the burden on the reviewer to decide by herself what the book is about, what it is trying to say.²⁹⁴

In other words, like Frye, Arnold suggests here that feminist presses provide lesbians with more than an “alternative” infrastructure for disseminating these ideas. Rather, they promote a form of political consciousness that sees political speech with a loving eye; they require the reading public to consider the choices, arguments, rhetorical techniques, and experiences that make up a piece of writing, and to engage it with a kind of openness to unfamiliarity that the loving public advocates. For Arnold, then, calling forth a new counterpublic will require feminists to commit to an array of new institutions that promote and accommodate radically new discursive forms. Women’s presses, she writes, “are in fact the real presses, the press of the future” because “through them, the art and politics of the future are being brought to flower.”²⁹⁵

What Arnold is suggesting, then, is one version of the kind of *counterpublic* that I have argued was central to lesbian feminist theory and practice throughout the 1980s. Such counterpublics emerge when new writing practices and institutions make it possible to imagine a new reading public and, with it, new forms of consciousness and political

²⁹³ Ibid., 22.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 20.

activity. While Arnold shares much with theorists of the loving public, though, we might pause to note at this point how strongly she seeks to make seamless these disjunctive moments of political disloyalty to mainstream discourses and institutions. As the debate between these thinkers reminds us, it is not always so easy to move from a political diagnosis – “arrogant perception,” for instance – to political disloyalty, and from disloyalty to institution-building, without losing sight of the relations of power that remain at work. Thus, while Arnold shares a commitment to seeing political speech with a loving eye, unlike Frye, Smith, Lugones, and other theorists of the loving public she pays little attention to the ongoing risks of conflating any particular audience with *the* lesbian feminist public – that is, the question of power that I have suggested is the key political question of publicity.

By the end of the short essay, Arnold’s conclusions only underline the dangers of smoothing over the difficult disjunctures involved in inaugurating a new counterpublic. She argues, for example, that if the lesbian feminist counterpublic requires the transformation of the most basic institutional and discursive hierarchies that work to marginalize lesbian writers, such institutional separation is the *only* way to ensure the survival of the movement and to enact the radical changes in publicity that lesbian feminism puts at the center of its practice. Whereas “the first feminist movement... allowed their movement to be controlled by the [male] finishing press, who showered them with glitter and then dropped them, leaving the impression that the issue they had raised was now settled,” she writes,

It is vital that we maintain control over our future, that we spend the energy of our imaginations and criticisms building feminist institutions that women will gain from both in money and skills. As soon as we understand our own interests, the

women's independent communications network can be made strong, deep, and positively permanent.²⁹⁶

Separation, then, is for Arnold not a matter of debate or negotiation, of open-ended coalition-building or consciousness-raising; it is a matter of control, permanence, and strength.

Arnold's perspective, however, is by no means the only viewpoint on publication in the 1970s, and, importantly, the article's notoriety at the time attests to the many lesbian feminists who contested the coterminous and stable relationship between diagnosis, institution-building, and coalition that she endorses. Indeed, only a few months later (and partially in response to Arnold's essay), *Sinister Wisdom* published the results of a survey conducted by Jan Clausen on the topic of separatism and feminist publishing. While *Sinister Wisdom's* report is far less polemical both in its form and in the politics it advocates – it gives voice to a number of disagreements, tensions, and contradictions in what separatism means for each writer – it shares Arnold's commitment to creating a kind of lesbian feminist counterpublic. In her introduction to the piece, for example, Clausen writes that “My basic assumption is that a writer's decisions about how to make her work available to an audience are in some measure political decisions – whether or not she acknowledges the fact.”²⁹⁷ Implicit in Clausen's framing of the survey, throughout, is the ambiguity of bearing responsibility to “the lesbian writing community,” which she understands, like Frye and Arnold, in both institutional and discursive terms. While she writes that “the” lesbian writing community is undeniably

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁹⁷ Jan Clausen, “The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community,” *Sinister Wisdom*, (Summer 1976): 95.

plural, “using these phrases [implies] that we as lesbians and especially as lesbian writers are aware of each other – influenced by each other’s opinions, art, politics. This interaction has its positive and negative aspects, but at the very least we have to recognize that we’re stuck with each other.”²⁹⁸ In other words, Clausen accepts *as a starting point* that lesbian feminism is a kind of public with a particular set of underlying knowledges, audiences, and institutions that differ from mainstream public life. Yet this assumption, for Clausen and her interlocutors, would not be enough to call forth a loving public: the assumption that a lesbian feminist counterpublic *can* and *should* exist, she writes, “was shared by a great majority of the women who answered the questionnaire.” However, “ideas about how to proceed from there varied considerably.”²⁹⁹

What Clausen seems to have learned in the process of conducting her survey on lesbian feminist publishing, then, is that while lesbians are “influenced by each other’s opinions, art, politics” – indeed, although “we’re stuck with one another” – one cannot presume that there is any *single* method of achieving a lasting, radical counterpublic. Quite unlike Arnold’s insistence that a more loving public depends wholly on “controlling” a set of radically separate meaning-making institutions, both Clausen and her survey respondents chafe deeply at the idea that “the lesbian writing community should act in any way to encourage or discourage [particular] publishing decisions on the part of its members.”³⁰⁰ Indeed, “this turned out to be the most emotionally charged of all the questions,” Clausen writes: “Julia Stanley’s, ‘No. I believe that coercion is wrong, no matter who engages in it!’ was typical. Some were incredulous that I’d even suggested the

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 98.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 107.

possibility--which surprised me, given that such actions...have been taken by individuals and groups within the community in the recent past.”³⁰¹ Indeed, Audre Lorde’s response to the proposal is indicative of the general reaction. “I don’t understand this question,” Lorde writes: “It sounds like censorship and I know you must be talking about something else. Please particularize or clarify. I disagree, let’s kill her?”³⁰²

For these writers, the coterminous relationship between writer-authors, institutions, and audiences appears to reinforce, not transform, the “arrogant perception” that underpins the “official” public sphere. If such perception has caused lesbians to be marginalized and erased from the “official” public, why should lesbian feminists expect that such marginalizations and erasures would not occur in the lesbian feminist public? Rather than insisting on a coterminous relationship between writer-authors, institutions, and audiences, then, the writers in *Sinister Wisdom* largely conclude that “the women’s presses cannot be our final goal, our ultimate solution – [though] they are absolutely necessary to us.”³⁰³ Instead, they gesture towards a process of negotiation that neither presumes total control over public institutions nor dictates the terms of engagement for members of the public. In the end, Clausen concludes, “That far-flung, heterogeneous grouping I have designated ‘lesbian writing community,’” – and which I have been arguing constitutes a *counterpublic* –

is never going to agree on a single political philosophy, strategy, or code of conduct. Nevertheless, *it is important for us to talk about where we’re headed, because the general tendency of what we do together is going to be more important than the actions of single individuals.* For many of us, the women’s presses have literally made possible our art, or movement, our lives. They

³⁰¹ Ibid., 106.

³⁰² Ibid., 108-109.

³⁰³ Ibid., 113.

represent a sort of vast collective accomplishment on the part of large numbers of women who have never shared a unified political vision.³⁰⁴

Rather than rely on any *single* institutional arrangement to promote the loving public that lesbian feminists desire, then, the authors represented in *Sinister Wisdom* collectively conclude that loving requires a more open-ended negotiation about institutions, one attentive to the different needs, views, and voices that inhere in an audience. In other words, as Judith McDaniel put it, for the lesbian feminists in *Sinister Wisdom*, building a new counterpublic would require each lesbian writer to remain “very definitely responsible to her community – which doesn’t mean she will always only publish within that community, but is accountable for her decision to those peers who are supporting her in her work.”³⁰⁵

In promoting a loving public, the *Sinister Wisdom* survey encourages a dramatically different kind of politics; it is one that emphasizes *process* over *definition*, one that privileges speaking *for and with others* over demanding *certain forms of speech*, one that emphasizes the *composition* of a political audience over *controlling* the terms of their engagement. As Nancy Luxon reminds us, conceptualizing political activity as an attempt to “compose the event” rather than as an authoritative attempt to “control” subjects and audiences is one important effect of the turn away from debates over the redeemability of the “official” public and instead towards emergent, “frame-breaking” publics. Such a turn in politics, she writes, “would seem to direct attention away from efforts to control events and outcomes,” as an arrogant perceiver might, “and toward their

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 115, emphasis mine.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 105.

instabilities – instabilities that might be sites for interpretive agency.”³⁰⁶ As I have been suggesting, the “loving public” is one that explicitly privileges the interpretive agency – speaking to and with others – that composition allows, even as it must remain ever-vigilant about the ways in which particular forms of persuasion, such as attempts to control access to and participation in certain institutions, “[conceal] the conventions that make them believable.”³⁰⁷ Indeed, the loving public is one that by definition strains against the idea that transformative counterpublics can ever emerge by defining a coterminous relationship between writer-authors, institutions, and audiences. In highlighting the ambiguities that inhere in building a loving public, then, these writers differently caution against the dangers of arrogant perception: as Audre Lorde put it in *SW* 18,

We – and by we I mean any group of two or more likeminded individuals of whom I happen to be one – we must beware of the fatal tendency to strangle anyone who chooses to expand our definitions of ourselves beyond ourselves. What is a lesbian?
 A lesbian feminist?
 The lesbian writing community?
 The lesbian press?
 is it black white poor rich middle class working class scholarly academic anti-intellectual funky racist or demure? Does it brush before bedtime?³⁰⁸

“The Meeting of Alliances:” Hypatia, 1976-1985

So far, I have suggested that lesbian feminists involved in this debate about feminist publishing theorized their political responsibilities in terms of transforming publicity by promoting a “loving” public. Thinkers like Frye and Lugones, for example,

³⁰⁶ Nancy Luxon, *Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); 273.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 110.

argued that the failure to love “across worlds” is a failure to acknowledge the ways that the institutions of public life have historically marginalized and excluded by arrogating legitimacy to certain audiences and ways of speaking over others. At the same time, however, they imagine a more robust conception of a loving public in order to call for a new set of relationships and responsibilities – in short, for a new kind of public altogether. Nevertheless, the kind of face-to-face politics that such a public would require remained unresolved into the 1980s. As is apparent in the debates in *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom*, for example, while each of the authors may have agreed with Lugones that “love has to be rethought, made anew,” they remained deeply ambivalent about what this would mean in the practical sense. Should feminists develop altogether new institutions? Ought they alter old ones? Was it necessary to persuade men and straight women to participate in this new lesbian feminist public? If so, how might this political task best be accomplished? These unresolved questions about what kind of public feminism should be, I will argue in this section, account for the torturously long and uncertain process by which the first journal of “feminist philosophy” came into being. At the same time, they attest to the idea that the members of the loving public *must*, if they hoped to grapple lovingly with the different audiences, institutional contexts, and forms of address that make up lesbian feminism, work through the challenges of articulation in radically different kinds of political contexts.

It is in the context of these fundamental ambiguities that I turn, finally, to the debate over the feminist journal *Hypatia*. *Hypatia*, unlike *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom*, is undoubtedly academic; the controversies and debates surrounding its emergence, then, reveal that the ambiguities about the extent to which lesbian feminists must *separate from*

or *alter* existing institutions, knowledges, and audiences – from the ‘official’ public sphere itself – were only exacerbated in the context of the academy. Unlike the debates over the public sphere which had animated lesbian feminist authors like Frye, Lugones, Moraga, Smith, and Lorde, questions about the publicity of *academic* feminism tended to displace, obscure, and muddle the political link between the institutions that underpin public life and the new kinds of audiences they would call forth. Instead, as these ambiguities began to be articulated in both political and academic contexts, further tensions in what it meant to build a “loving” public emerged. On the one hand, the efforts of those trying to articulate the commitments of a loving lesbian feminist public within academic institutions had the paradoxical effect of shifting the focus on publication, distribution, and audience onto the terrain of academic discipline-building. In so doing, these discourses diverged from the longer tradition of conceptualizing lesbian feminism as a robust and transformative counterpublic. On the other hand, another strain of thinking within this context hews much more closely to the conceptual and political terrain laid out by theorists of the loving public, and emphasizes the challenges of articulating theory as a task of speaking for, with, and about others.

Whatever *Hypatia* has become in the four decades since its inception, the contours of “feminist philosophy” were, in the late 1970s, incredibly unclear. When members of the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) met to discuss the proposal for a new journal on feminist philosophy, for example, they also collected and circulated a document outlining SWIP members’ various suggestions, concerns, and apprehensions about the shape of the new journal. The document, which was collected by Iris Marion Young, outlines both “arguments for [and against] restricting the journal to women

authors” and “arguments for [and against] restricting the journal to articles of feminist topics.” These topics, of course, are deeply intertwined with the questions of separation that had occupied lesbian feminist writers in the pages of *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom*: could feminist theory call forth an audience that would sustain it? Would dependency on the institutions of the “official” public sphere dilute or subvert feminist politics? Would dictating these terms reinscribe the kind of “arrogant perception” that has, up to now, characterized the public sphere?

Indeed, on the issue of separation – whether the journal should be restricted to women authors and feminist topics – SWIP members were even more divided than were the contributors to *Quest* and *Sinister Wisdom*. While on the one hand many of its members agreed that “women have less free access to ‘standard’ avenues of publication than men,” on the other hand, some viewed separating materially from “finishing” presses would “lessen women’s chances to publish in other places” and that “quality of work submitted would either be, or be deemed to be, low, since the best women would want their work to reach a wider audience and would have it accepted in ‘standard’ journals.”³⁰⁹ One SWIP member responded to the arguments for and against a journal of feminist philosophy in a lengthy letter to the editorial group, arguing that while “at the moment...the Journal should not restrict its authors by sex,” it “*should* restrict its papers to ones on philosophical feminism (which I won’t try to define, although this would have to be done if such a policy were adopted).”³¹⁰ For this member, while lesbian feminism had already done the difficult work of building an audience outside of the academy,

³⁰⁹ Letter from Holly Goldman to SWIP editorial board, December 14, 1975. SWIP files, Series One. Feminist Theory Archive, Brown University Pembroke Center.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

concerns about the viability of a feminist audience *within* the academy were paramount.

“In itself,” she writes,

the fact that we had an all-female authorship would only attract a small readership to the Journal – at best all women philosophers (who as we all know are a small group) and a few sympathetic males. Other potential readers may well be turned away by such a policy, since it’s a psychological fact we must recognize (and are trying to combat) that most men and many women tend to take the intellectual efforts of women less seriously.³¹¹

In other words, feminists inside of the academy had a different problem of audience than lesbian feminists grappled with more generally. While lesbian feminists writ large were seeking to call forth a transformative *counterpublic* – that is, a disloyal audience organized around new principles and responsibilities – feminists in the academy had to grapple with the additional fact of their disciplinary audiences in order to ensure their survival. For the SWIP member arguing against separation from the academic institutions, then, this meant recognizing

the fact that women authors with really outstanding work would probably choose to send them to high-prestige standard journals such as the Journal of Philosophy rather than to us, unless they had an extreme ideological commitment to SWIP and a willingness to disregard their personal and career interests in being published in such fora.³¹²

Indeed, the member writes, the goals of disloyal audiences that lesbian feminists had promoted in the late 1970s and early 1980s strained deeply against the needs of academics. For her, a journal on feminist philosophy satisfied an entirely different set of needs than did the broader feminist public. In the academy,

- (1) Women need publications in order to get and retain jobs, and such a journal will make it easily for them to compile a bibliography... (2) Women are prevented, through prejudice and longstanding socialization effects, from engaging in standard professional activities, and therefore lack the practice

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

which makes one good at them... (3) One wants to publish articles so as to gain a broad hearing for one's ideas, thus promoting the truth and having an impact on ongoing philosophical investigation, as well as benefiting from any resulting criticism the article elicits.... (4) Women must demonstrate to the philosophical world that they can indeed do well.³¹³

Put differently, *academic* feminists had fundamentally different kinds of attachments to traditional audiences than did the disloyal audience of lesbian feminists; insofar as they needed to speak to and with philosophers of all stripes in order to achieve academic milestones like tenure, they would need to be able to square lesbian feminism's aim to build an explicitly disloyal audience with academic feminism's aim for inclusion in the academy.

In addition to articulating a distinctive set of attachments to traditional institutions of publicity, the SWIP member's emphasis on harnessing existing audiences such as "philosophers" during the negotiations over *Hypatia's* birth similarly shifted the group's understanding of the *purpose* of a feminist counterpublic. Whereas thinkers like Frye and Lugones emphasized the loving public's disloyalty to existing political institutions and relationships, and whereas the authors in *Sinister Wisdom* described the lesbian feminist counterpublic as a forum for ongoing and transformative negotiation, the SWIP member's memo stresses instead the need for feminists to gain access to and inclusion in the existing academic public:

...one of the chief goals of most women philosophers in organizing women's groups is to change the structure of the current philosophical world so that philosophers who happen to be women may take part as they wish in the activities of that world without having to surmount sexist prejudices which prevent them from having the same opportunities with respect to jobs, fellowships, publications, etc., as men do. That is, they want to do philosophy in much the way that men do, and therefore want to change the structure of the establishment which prevents them from doing so. I do not believe it is in the interests of this

³¹³ Ibid.

group of women philosophers to secede from the presently male-dominated philosophical world, e.g., by establishing a journal of their own which publishes only women authors.³¹⁴

Here, the SWIP member insists that the mechanisms of publication are not a means towards transforming the public along new forms of association and responsibility; instead, they are instruments by which feminists might gain access, legibility, and status within the existing institutions. Similarly, arguments against “restricting the journal to articles on feminist topics” included, for example, the impression that “It would interfere with the goal of getting feminist topics accepted as *serious* philosophical topics, and feminist philosophy as a *serious* way of doing philosophy.”³¹⁵ In short, we might associate this form of publicity with Nancy Fraser’s emphasis on incorporating “subaltern counterpublics” *into* a pluralized public sphere.

Although *Hypatia* editors attempted to resolve the notion of integrating transformative feminist publics with the existing institutional demands of the academy, these ambiguities proved difficult to overcome. However, while some members of the editorial board viewed these challenges as evidence that academic feminism was, in fact, a fundamentally distinct endeavor than the creation of a disloyal counterpublic, others were not so quick to dismiss these challenges of audience as mere impasses. Like the debates over race that erupted in conversations over separatism, these challenges of distinctive audiences with different relations to the loving public proved, for some, to be a source of strength rather than weakness. Reflecting back on the early years of defining

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ SWIP-Midwest, Agenda for Business Meeting, Feb. 28, 1976. SWIP files, Series One.

Hypatia's foray into publicity, for example, editorial board member Jackie Thomason wrote

In establishing the board and the journal we ran into the same issues and contradictions in a new guise. What would be the criteria for selection? Would we make any attempt to represent areas of philosophy? Of feminist thought? Would we try for some sort of racial balance? Should we ensure Lesbian representation? Should there be student board members? What did “representation” mean? Simply that we included groups in our search or actively sought them out? Or dedicated a position? Did we want to ask for the support of established women academic philosophers? What role, if any, would men have on the journal? Could they be on the board? Could they submit or review papers?³¹⁶

Ultimately, Thomason writes, these issues boiled down to one key contradiction: how *could* feminists square “the formal organization needed to publish” with a political commitment to a transformative, “loving” public? Was it impossible to hope for “maintaining autonomy while obtaining funding, the meeting of alliances with universities and publishers and corporations?” Ultimately, she concludes, the challenges that these frictions in audience and publicity introduce to feminist theory are neither incompatible nor threatening to the very process of calling forth a loving public that had animated lesbian feminism for a decade. In fact, they simply underline the need to remain deeply engaged in the practice of “seeing with a loving eye,” of speaking to and with others:

I wondered then, and still do, whether it is even possible to use the printed word to do all the things we wanted. We knew I think that there were serious contradictions in creating a journal that was both substantial and academic and that would allow us the freedom of process that we wanted, no needed. Now this contradiction seems so vivid, and to be just another manifestation of the contradictions with which women must live, for now, if they are going to do anything new in the context of the existing social/political/economic structures. That’s probably [why] we were going at it at the time over separatism and arguing about equality etc – so many of which have turned into substantial contributions

³¹⁶ Letter from Jackie Thomason to Peg Simon. July 10, 1988. SWIP files, Series One.

to social and philosophical thought... With, of course, none of the issues truly resolved, or resolvable. Because it is process...

Thomason's understanding of the relationships that inhere in *publics*, then, represent a second, distinct line of reasoning from the SWIP member's concerns about legibility and access. Rather than asking how lesbian feminism can become included more fully into the institutions and discourses of the academy, Thomason here argues that the tensions that lesbian feminism confronts in the academy only deepens our understanding of how the process of "loving" must be practiced; it requires a deeper grappling with the challenges that such inclusion might present to the broader, more transformative goals of lesbian feminist publicity.

Conclusion

Given the circumstances of *Hypatia*'s birth – and the lessons its founders hoped to draw from the experience – perhaps it should not have come as such a shock that the same journal, in 2017, was home to one of the most hotly contested controversies in recent academic feminist history. After publishing an article comparing what the author calls "transracialism" to trans* identities, the editors of *Hypatia* received an open letter with 830 signatories arguing, most powerfully, that the article

fails to seek out and sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color) in its discussion of 'transracialism' [...] [Moreover,] these failures do harm to the communities who might expect better from *Hypatia*. It is difficult to imagine that this article could have been endorsed by referees working in critical race theory and trans theory, which are the two areas of specialization that should have been most relevant to the review process. *A message has been sent, to authors and readers alike, that white cis scholars may engage in speculative*

*discussion of these themes without broad and sustained engagement with those theorists whose lives are most directly affected by transphobia and racism.*³¹⁷

The dangers of failing to understand the challenges of a feminist public, it seems, are still very much present: as the writers of the open letter remind us, feminist scholarship *continues* to require sustained, careful, and coalition-oriented engagement with the relations of power that remain present even in the institutions, discourses, and writing practices of counterpublics. What the founders of *Hypatia* during the 1980s remind us, however, is the fact that the *process* of negotiating relations of power and difficult coalitional praxes was, in fact, the point all along.

Testament to the success of the notion of a transformative, open-ended “loving public” over one that appeals to control over the public sphere appears, for example, in *Hypatia*’s first issue, published as a “piggyback” issue in *Women’s Studies International Forum* in 1983. In it, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman published their essay “Have We Got a Theory for You!” in which they argued that

talking about one’s life, telling one’s story, in the company of those doing the same... is constitutive of the feminist method. And so the demand that the woman’s voice be heard and attended to has been made for a variety of reasons: not just so as to greatly increase the chances that true accounts of women’s lives will be given, but also because the articulation of experience (in myriad ways) is among the hallmarks of a self-determining individual or community.³¹⁸

The variety of experiences that inhere in the lesbian feminist audience – experiences of race and racism, for example, that will appear in the next chapter – require, for Lugones

³¹⁷ “Open Letter to Hypatia,”

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1efp9C0MHch_6Kfgtlm0PZ76nirWtcEsqWHcvgidl2mU/viewform?ts=59066d20&edit_requested=true

³¹⁸ Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice,’” *The Women’s Studies International Forum* 6.6 (1983): 574.

and Spelman, “requires that you make a real space for our articulating, interpreting, theorizing and reflecting about the connections among them – a real space must be a non-coerced space – and/or that you follow us into our world out of friendship.”³¹⁹ They require, in the end, a vigilance against arrogant perception, whether it appears in the guise of existing public institutions, within lesbian feminist frameworks, or within the academy. Members of the loving public, Lugones and Spelman write, ask themselves:

When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable? Are the concerns we have in being accountable to ‘the profession’ at odds with the concerns we have in being accountable to those about whom we theorize? Do commitments to ‘the profession,’ method, getting something published, getting tenure, lead us to talk and act in ways at odds with what we ourselves (let alone others) would regard as ordinary, decent behavior? To what extent do we presuppose that really understanding another person or culture requires our behaving in ways that are disrespectful, even violent? That is, to what extent do we presuppose that getting and/or publishing require disregarding the wishes of others, lying to them, wresting information from them against their wills? Why and how do we think theorizing about others provides *understanding* of them? Is there any sense in which theorizing about others is a short-cut for understanding them?³²⁰

These questions, I would argue, are undeniably the underlying questions of a *loving* public, and were animated by various debates over institutions, norms, and needs that various lesbian feminists would encounter as they tried to call forth their counterpublic in their writing, publishing, and academic work. They are questions that require difficult confrontations with the inability to legislate, from the beginning, about the institutions that will be required to call forth *just* audiences; that require even more difficult conversations *with others* about the terms in which those audiences will be addressed; finally, they require the “recognition that you do not have the authority of knowledge

³¹⁹ Ibid., 576.

³²⁰ Ibid., 580.

[and] coming to the task without ready-made theories to frame our lives.”³²¹ As Lugones and Spelman put it, the loving public is, in the end, neither a definitive set of institutions or relations, but rather “*a striving to understand what it is that our voices are saying.*” Only by remaining engaged in the complex negotiations about how existing institutions, discourses, and audiences affect one another can a transformative public, organized not around arrogance, but around love, emerge. Only then, they write, “can we engage in a mutual dialogue that does not reduce each one of us to instances of the abstraction called ‘woman.’”³²²

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid., 581.

Chapter 3

Politics as Sinister Wisdom:

Reparation and Responsibility in the Lesbian Feminist Counterpublic

“The passage is through – not over, not by,
not around, but through.”

- Cherríe Moraga

Introduction

On July 8, 2018, a group of 10 self-identified lesbian activists disrupted the London Pride Parade by laying across the parade path, holding banners reading “Lesbian = Female Homosexual,” “Lesbian, Not Queer,” and “Transactivism Erases Lesbians.” Almost immediately, parade participants, members of the press, and an audience of international queers responded by decrying the protesters’ position, arguing that it represented a deeply trans-phobic, exclusionary approach to politics. The episode reached viral-level notoriety within days, with queer activists calling for resignations of London’s Pride organizers and the small group of activists accusing their critics of employing the term “TERF” (the shorthand for “trans-exclusionary radical feminist”) as hate speech. Although neither side appears willing to back down, hundreds of think-pieces, thousands of tweets, and several published academic articles later a rather uneasy consensus (uneasy, that is, for the intense acrimony that remains around the issue) has emerged in the broader community: not *all* lesbians are transphobic.³²³

³²³ See, for example, the social media response to the London Pride protestors, who have responded to calls to “Get the L Out” with an alternative campaign - #LWithTheT – designed to promote solidarity in the “LGBT” community. See Lottie L’Amour. “Lesbians Join the Fight Against TERFs in a Social Media Campaign After UK Pride was Hijacked,” *Them* (July 9, 2018): <https://www.them.us/story/lesbians-join-the-fight-against-terfs>.

Obviously, this conclusion, on a literal level, is true. Still, the episode illuminates familiar political battle lines: namely, an intense, acrimonious fight over what we now often call “identity politics.”³²⁴ In particular, the episode raises questions about whether feminists and queers ought to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ *essentialist* identities.³²⁵ What does it mean to claim the identity “lesbian” vs. the identity “queer”? For many, what’s at stake in choosing one or the other identification is the extent to which one believes that members of a group – say, ‘lesbians’ – must share some essential similarity – a certain biological sex, maybe, or a preference for certain kinds of sexual practices. As one might expect, defining an identity category this way will inevitably exclude and subordinate some people, perhaps because they are biologically different or because they prefer different

³²⁴ Although ‘identity politics’ is, as I noted in my introduction, largely seen as a dangerous and exclusive political orientation, it is no less debated – and hotly contested – today than it was in the 1990s. While some scholars, for instance, have been engaged in the process of “reclaiming” identity – see, for example, Paula M. Goya and Michael Hames-Garcia, ed., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) – others have chosen to try to trouble the term – for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Politics of Identity,” *Daedalus* 135 vol. 4 (2006): 15-22. Still others have tried simply to trace the movement of debate over the term, tracking the ways that this phrase differently evokes political possibility and foreclosure over time, ex. Nancy Whittier, “Identity Politics, Consciousness-Raising, and Visibility Politics,” *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women’s Social Movement Activism*, ed. Holly McCammon, Verta Taylor, Jo Reger, and Rachel L. Einwohner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 376-397.

³²⁵ Critiques of “essentialism” in feminist theory are just as widespread and controversial as those of “identity politics.” See Charlotte Witt, “What is Gender Essentialism?” *Feminist Metaphysics: Explorations in the Ontology of Sex, Gender and the Self*, ed. Charlotte Witt. (New York: Springer, 2011), 11-26. As Susan Hekman points out, debates over essentialism and anti-essentialism have motivated some of the most important trends and transformations in feminist theory, especially since the 1990s. *The Feminine Subject* (London: Polity, 2014). Below, I trace how debates over “essentialism” emerged in feminist theory, and how they tended to displace different kinds of questions about responsibility and repair.

kinds of sexual practices.³²⁶ But as the slogan “Lesbian, Not Queer” suggests, “queer” is viewed as an inherently more inclusive, *anti-essentialist* identity than lesbian.³²⁷

Claiming a queer identity means that we don’t have to assume that members share a particular set of traits; rather, membership in queer identity signals a commitment to transgressing – and subverting – all sorts of hierarchies across lines of class, race, gender identity, (dis)ability, and so on. What is at issue in the stark contrast between *lesbian* and *queer* identities, then, is what seems to be a core question: to what degree are we willing to identify ourselves in ways that, by definition, exclude some by presuming an essential sameness?

As many scholars of trans* politics have pointed out, scenes like the London Pride protest draw upon a long history of transphobic essentialism on the part of some lesbians and lesbian feminists.³²⁸ However, as I have argued throughout this work, when such scenes emerge as political heuristics – that is, as flashpoints for a more complicated historical and political legacy – they also tend to reduce complicated and urgent questions

³²⁶ This, for example, is the thesis of Gayle Rubin’s foundational “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (New York: Routledge, 1984).

³²⁷ As Diana Fuss points out, strong undercurrents of essentialism in “lesbian” theory – especially in contrast to gay male theorizing, which more easily embraced Foucault’s anti-foundationalist theory of sexuality – have contributed historically to this perception. At the same time, however, Fuss, writing in 1989, recognizes that these undercurrents also existed in order to insist upon certain political connections to feminism and the women’s movement, and to resist a full incorporation of lesbian theory into ‘gay studies.’ *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

³²⁸ As Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry point out in their introduction to a special issue of *Hypatia* entitled “Transgender Studies and Feminism,” the rift between trans* activists and lesbian feminists occurred as early as 1973, when Beth Elliot, a trans-woman, was expelled from the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis on the charge of being “an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer – with the mentality of a rapist.” (This accusation is cited as coming from Robin Morgan). *Hypatia* 24 vol. 3 (2009); 2.

of responsibility, power, and coalition-building to more simplistic questions about whether one is for or against ‘retrograde’ identities and ‘exclusive’ organizing strategies.³²⁹ At the same time, as these questions are posed as simple choices between good and evil, past and present, or inclusion and exclusion, what gets left behind is the crucial historical and political contexts in which concepts like ‘essentialism’ and ‘identity’ emerged *as* political heuristics. Paradoxically, then, as I argued in my introduction and in Chapter 1, these overdetermined choices tend to obscure the *actual* claims of the marginalized – such as lesbians of color and transwomen – by reducing their specific demands to catchall claims to inclusivity.³³⁰

Most disturbingly, however, this phenomenon – the reduction of complex questions about intra-group marginalization, responsibility, and repair to mere questions of right and wrong – is far from new; in fact, as I will argue in this chapter, the inability of many feminist and queer theorists to think beyond issues of trans* inclusion and, instead, towards issues of intra-group power and responsibility rhyme with the fate of

³²⁹ Zein Murib points out that the seemingly coherent interest group “GLBT” was far from obvious to its various constituents, even in the late 1990s. Murib writes that “interest group coalitions” like GLBT “are shaped by political circumstances, influence the boundaries of political identities for members, and reproduce inequalities.” “Rethinking GLBT as a Political Category,” *LGBT Politics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Marla Brettschneider, Susan Burgess, and Christine Keating (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 16.

³³⁰ As Susan Stryker puts it in her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Wittle, transgender studies cannot be conceptualized merely as an “add on” to be included in the LGBTQ+ coalition. Rather, transgender studies – and a trans* historiography – ought to enable “a critique of the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background. Ultimately, it is not just transgender phenomena per se that are of interest, but rather the manner in which these phenomena reveal the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others.” (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

earlier debates over women of color feminism during the 1980s. Although lesbians of color pushed, with considerable success, for a framing of lesbian feminism as a relational and reflexive political praxis, this historical legacy is hardly remembered by queer theorists as they try to disentangle a ‘progressive’ queer theory from its ‘reactionary’ lesbian feminist past. For example, while the term ‘essentialism’ is circulating once again in the pages of academic queer theory to denounce the ways that groups like lesbian feminists police and exclude “different” political subjects like transwomen, most theorists of an earlier generation would have associated the term with the thesis of several landmark texts from the late 1980s such as Elizabeth Spelman’s *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Born of her engagement not with transwomen but with feminists of color, Spelman frames the problem of essentialism as *the* fundamental “paradox at the heart of feminism:”

Any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice versa. Is it possible to give the things women have in common their full significance without thereby implying that the differences among us are less important? How can we describe those things that differentiate women without eclipsing what we share in common?³³¹

For Spelman, essentialism is something both seemingly necessary – “a coherent feminist politics seems to require a singleness of voice and purpose”³³² – and politically, ethically, and philosophically dangerous. Like current calls to rethink the category ‘queer’ as an achievement of political coalition-building rather than a “pre-political fact rooted in biological similarities,” Spelman’s insistence that essentialism threatens our ability to

³³¹ Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 3.

³³² *Ibid.*, 161.

observe, analyze, and repair differences *among* women – a lesson she credits lesbian feminist thinkers like Maria Lugones for having taught her³³³ – rhymes deeply with the concerns of contemporary queer theorists, who insist that we must attend to “inequalities produced *within* groups as well as *between* them.”³³⁴

If the problem of essentialism is nothing new to feminists – and, as I will argue in what follows, to lesbian feminists in particular – why is it that queer theorists tend to proceed as if lesbian feminists have had nothing to say about intra-group power and privilege, coalition-building, or political repair? As I have suggested throughout this work, when contemporary theorists look at political groups like “lesbian feminists,” they typically start from the assumption that this group problematically represents some attempt to enforce a “pre-political,” or essentialist, identity. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, this way of thinking historically about the political goals of lesbian feminism during the 1980s is both inaccurate and reductive; instead, we ought to think of lesbian feminism as an attempt to call forth a new kind of *public*. The word “public,” unlike identity, doesn’t immediately make us think of identities, essentialist or otherwise; instead, it makes us think of questions such as: when we speak to and for a public, who do we imagine as our audience? Who is most likely to be heard and persuaded by that audience, and why? What kinds of responsibilities do the privileged members of a public have towards those whose voices are marginalized? In short, I argued that thinking of a group as a potential “public” alerts us to the kinds of structural, *intra*-group inequalities

³³³ Spelman offers special thanks to Lugones in her acknowledgments, noting that *Inessential Woman* is a “working out of some of the problems Maria and I have discussed and written about together in recent years.” (Some of this writing – in particular, “Have We Got A Theory for You!” is cited in the previous chapter). *Inessential Woman*, xii.

³³⁴ Murib, “Rethinking GLBT as a Political Category,” 30.

and the *processes* of dialogue, critique, and accounting that must accompany coalition-building. Another way of parsing the questions raised by publicity, then, would be to say that they demand a relational approach rather than a substantive, or essentialist, one. In other words, thinking in terms of publics – and the complex dynamics of speaking for, with, and to others that they entail – allows us to move away from precisely the intractable political problems, such as essentialism, that queer theorists argue inhere in ‘identity politics.’

In this chapter, then, I want to put these largely forgotten relational lessons of lesbian feminism to work; that is, I want to better understand how the resources of a ‘loving public’ differently enable negotiations about issues of internal hierarchies, coalition-building, and responsibility for intersectional problems such as intra-group racism and transphobia. In what follows, I build on my argument from Chapter 2 by suggesting that when we understand lesbian feminism as an attempt to build a new kind of public, it becomes apparent that lesbian feminists of the 1980s never actually framed their politics in terms of exclusion or essentialism; rather, they practiced a uniquely *relational* political praxis. In fact, lesbian feminism included a diverse array of women – Black, Chicana, and Indigenous women, working class and poor women, writers, activists, and academics – from the start. So, as tempting as it is to understand lesbians as inherently essentialist (especially because some lesbian groups like #GetTheLOut play into this view today), understanding their politics as a form of publicity must shift our focus away from problems of essentialism and exclusion and instead towards intra-group relationships fraught with power and privilege.

Lesbian feminists, in sharp contrast to the way we think of them today, were once very serious about how such intra-group privileges threatened their political communities, and advocated for practices of accountability and repair that offer rich political resources as contemporary theorists approach these kinds of political challenges today. Returning to this way of thinking, then, recaptures the real challenges of intersectional work, in which remaining attentive at all times to how the existence of power *within* a group creates problems that can't be so easily solved by inclusion or by simply 'calling out' those with ostensibly retrograde or exclusive politics.³³⁵ Because most queer theorists take intersectionality as a starting point rather than a conclusion, as I argued in Chapter 1, looking back at the relational lessons of lesbian feminism teaches us something that these contemporary theorists often forget: intersectionality is not only about *including* people different from us, but about learning how to be *in dialogue* with them; it is about being willing to accept the responsibility to *change the structures* in which we exist. That these resources far exceed the problems of 'identity' and 'essentialism' are clear; moreover, though, I will conclude this chapter by suggesting that they offer several important reminders as contemporary queer theorists and actors negotiate new and persistent hierarchies, such as those emerging between cisgender lesbians and transwomen.

³³⁵ Many observers of "callout culture" in spaces like college campuses, for example, have also noted that the impulse to make snap decisions that signal one's allegiances tend to oversimplify and paper over complex issues of hierarchy, trust, and accountability. See, for example, Conor Friedersdorf, "The Destructiveness of Call-Out Culture on Campus: Reflections from Undergraduates of the Social Media Era," *The Atlantic* (May 8, 2017): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/call-out-culture-is-stressing-out-college-students/524679/>.

Such an effort to reconstruct the political valences of lesbianism may surprise many. Given its fraught contemporary resonances, as well as the purportedly more expansive possibilities offered by queer politics, why attempt to rehabilitate lesbian politics at all? In what follows, I argue that recovering the relational valences of lesbianism is, on the one hand, an important historical task: it highlights and clarifies the role of lesbian feminist writers, activists, and scholars in developing the very democratic ethos that is now associated primarily with 90s-era queer theory. In locating the roots of this relational ethics in lesbian feminist works of the 1970s and 1980s, I aim to remind historians and political theorists alike of an embedded, participatory history that is too often papered over by more abstract claims about the emergence of queer theory. On the other hand, however, it is also a political task. For those concerned with the persistence of exclusions and hierarchies within the queer community, lesbian writers' efforts to develop a reparative praxis that acknowledges its own internal hierarchies may serve as important reminders of the challenges that arise – and the democratic possibilities that emerge – when experiences of inequality exceed the analytical frameworks available to us for interpreting and resolving them. The lessons that lesbian feminists in the following pages learned from engaging in politics together are neither simple nor clear-cut. There is no inherently right way to resolve these relationships (though there is certainly a *wrong* way, as the transphobic London protestors demonstrate); there are only complex entanglements embedded in relationships of authority and subordination. The lesbians in the following pages largely understood this: although they engage in deep disagreements about the nature of theory, institutions, and organizing strategy, they consistently attempt to trouble easy dyads between 'correct' and 'incorrect,' or 'past' and 'future' politics.

Seeing Lesbian Politics Relationally

Let me begin to probe these questions by pointing out something of a historical oddity: that contemporary feminist and queer theorists use the term ‘identity politics’ to designate an essentialist politics is, in itself, a profound historical event. In addition to Spelman’s, many political theorists might associate the critique of essentialist identity politics with Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury*, in which she locates ‘identity politics’ as a turn away from postmodernism and, with it, from politics altogether.³³⁶ Such a turn, she argues, “may ultimately be coterminous with a wariness about politics, when politics is grasped as a terrain of struggle without fixed or metaphysical referents and a terrain of power’s irreducible and pervasive presence in human affairs.”³³⁷ In contrast to *politics*, here conceived as an openness – or at least an acceptance – of the unsettled and unsettling nature of struggle, Brown figures ‘identity’ as an attempt to foreclose or stabilize political struggle in advance. Thus, while investments in identity may not begin with the *intention* of essentialism, their affective attachment to foundations and their hesitation to unsettle the known has deeply normative, or essentialist, effects. However much it feels intuitive and familiar, though, Brown’s definition of identity politics as an anti-politics is a stunning reversal of the term as it was used by most lesbian feminists from the late 1970s onward.

³³⁶ Uses of Brown’s definition of identity politics appear widely in feminist and queer scholarship; however, they have also gained a wider circulation in popular presses, journals, and Leftist magazines. Below, I discuss Susan Bickford’s characterization of how Brown’s thesis has circulated in these contexts.

³³⁷ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 37.

Indeed, even a brief glance at the usage of the term ‘identity politics’ from the late 1970s to the late 1980s reveals that Brown’s is far from how that vast majority of its earlier advocates would have understood the term. As a concept, ‘identity politics’ emerged first, of course, in the pages of the Combahee River Collective Statement, and its usage in that landmark document couldn’t be farther from Brown’s. In stark contrast to Brown’s popular characterization of identity as an ant-politics, for example, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out about the use of ‘identity politics’ in the CRC statement, the term was used to call attention to two *deeply* political ideas. First, she writes, where thinkers writing since Brown have argued that ‘identity’ tends to foreclose participation on the part of the most marginalized, the CRC argued quite the opposite:

oppression on the basis of identity – whether it was racial, gender, class, or sexual orientation identity – was a source of political radicalization. Black women were not radicalizing over abstract issues of doctrine; they were radicalizing because of the ways that their multiple identities opened them up to overlapping oppression and exploitation... In other words, Black women’s oppression made them more open to the possibilities of radical politics and activism.³³⁸

In other words, identity, as conceptualized by the CRC, serves as an important invitation or incitement *into* politics, especially when it’s used as a way to mobilize those who have been subordinated or marginalized in traditional political structures. Second, where Brown and others argue that identity is often mobilized to turn away from the contestatory nature of political engagement, Taylor points out that the CRC understood that identity can unsettle just as much as it defines:

‘identity politics’ was not just about who you were; *it was also about what you could do* to confront the oppression you were facing... Identity politics became a

³³⁸ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 8. Emphasis mine.

way that those suffering that oppression could become politically active to confront it.³³⁹

Thus, in Taylor's telling, 'identity politics' is less the antithesis of publicity than it is a way of *calling upon* and *mobilizing* the very marginalized subjects who make up the potential audience of a radically transformative counterpublic.

Taylor's account of the CRC as a deeply political practice – and its clear tensions with the characterization of identity found in works like Brown's – resonates with several theorists who, while not altogether recuperating identity politics, have questioned the close association between "identity" and "essentialism." In her tellingly titled (or, as she puts it, "ungainly") essay "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics," for example, Susan Bickford argues that while thinkers like Brown³⁴⁰ "criticize the production of a resentful self focused on redress of its (incurable) injuries and desirous of unity, stability, and the (unachievable) exclusion of difference,"³⁴¹ this characterization of feminist politics as *primarily* concerned with a fear of politics unnecessarily brackets important complexities of feminist thinking. Citing lesbians of color like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde to make her case, Bickford argues that a prominent (lesbian) feminist tradition conceptualizes identity "as something *created*, constructed in this specific world, and in the presence of complex others – and largely through words (speech and writing)."³⁴² Again, in strong contrast to those who would cast lesbian feminism as

³³⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁴⁰ In the essay, Bickford also elaborates the positions of other "anti-identity" thinkers, such as Todd Gitlin, Sheldon Wolin, and Judith Butler.

³⁴¹ Susan Bickford, "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship," *Hypatia* 12 no. 4 (1997): 116

³⁴² Ibid., 122.

problematically essentialist, exclusionary, and retrograde, Bickford's elaboration of identity puts these theories in the context of publicity, coalition-building, and dialogue.

What accounts for this disjuncture? Why has it been so difficult for theorists, writing in the wake of the queer 1990s, to recognize the “embodiedness and embeddedness of identity, not simply as constraints or necessary conditions, but as the materials with which we create”³⁴³? In this section, I will argue that feminist and queer theorists have largely have come to see ‘identity’ as something inherently essentialist and anti-political – something ‘lesbians’ and not ‘queers’ engage in – only by allowing the deeply *relational* understanding of identity that predominated during the 1980s to recede from view. Although ‘relational thinking’ is popular across a wide variety of academic disciplines,³⁴⁴ I argue below that its usage in lesbian feminism differs from many of these disciplines. Whereas lesbian feminists – and particularly lesbian feminists of color – construed the relationships between and among women as an invitation *into* scenes of political engagement, as Taylor and Bickford urge us to recognize, this insight is oftentimes misconstrued as a dryer, more mundane methodological maxim.³⁴⁵ The

³⁴³ Bickford, “Anti-Anti-Identity Politics,” 122.

³⁴⁴ Relational thinking, for example, is strongly associated with several prominent strands of critical theory, including psychoanalysis and Marxism, and is understood as an established methodology in traditional disciplines such as sociology, where it is associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

³⁴⁵ For example, while *The Ashgate Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke, notes “relationality” as one of four main methodological pillars of queer theory – the others are identity, discourse, and normativity – it tends to foreground relations not between queers themselves, but between practices of queer world-making *and the researchers, writers, and theorists engaging them*. “The erotics of thinking, speaking, writing, listening and reading,” editor Noreen Giffney writes in the Introduction, “is a chief concern for those of us who engage in an intensely personal and self-reflexive relationship with the discourses we (en)counter and (re)produce.” (New York: Routledge, 2016 [2009]), 9.

slippage from thinking of relationality in a political register to a methodological one is far from inconsequential; indeed, as I will argue in what follows, it is this slippage that makes it possible to categorize lesbian politics as inherently essentialist, especially when compared to the seemingly more capacious category ‘queer.’ Doing so, however, causes readers to sidestep or miss altogether the ways in which lesbians, a deeply heterogeneous group defined as much for their internal inequalities as for their essentialist commitment to “sisterhood,” put both relational politics at the center not just of their theories but of their political praxis. Finally, I suggest here that thinking of relationality in political terms is essential for adequately understanding attempts by lesbians of color to call white lesbian feminists to account for racial inequalities within the movement.

While relationality has become a common methodological framework in critical theory, then, I draw my conception of relationality as it appears in lesbian politics from the work of Iris Marion Young, who herself was deeply involved in the feminist and lesbian feminist contexts that have animated my narrative thus far.³⁴⁶ According to Young, the alternative to a relational approach is a substantive, or essentialist, one. An essentialist understanding of groups “both denies the similarities that many group members have with those not considered in the group, and denies the many shadings and differentiations within the group.”³⁴⁷ In other words, thinking of a social group as an aggregation of individuals who share some inherent identity – like “lesbianism,” for example – presumes both that every lesbian relates to every non-lesbian in the same way,

³⁴⁶ As I noted in Chapter 2, for instance, Young was responsible for collecting feedback and criticisms of the *Hypatia* proposal from SWIP members in the late 1970s. She was also a careful reader of many of the thinkers whose work populates this chapter.

³⁴⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89.

on the one hand, and that every lesbian relates to lesbianism *itself* in the same way, on the other. An essentialist interpretation of the group “lesbians,” then, would require that the identity marker itself is understood as an inherent, unified, and fundamentally similar attribute that each individual in the group somehow “possesses.” Such a view, argues Young, will inevitably meet with the now-familiar charges leveled at “identity politics” – namely, that they reify identity categories by denying differences in the ways that members of a group experience that identity.

In contrast, Young argues that observers of groups should think of them through a relational lens. According to Young, a relational lens differs from an essentialist one in two main ways. First, where essentialist thinking defines a group by “some set of attributes its members share,” relational thinking emphasizes “the relations in which they stand to others.”³⁴⁸ In other words, where an essentialist view of “lesbians” might see (or create) a common set of sexual, cultural, or political practices across all members of the group, a relational one would instead emphasize the fact that this group is defined less by the things that members *actually* share than by their relative marginalization in relation to heterosexual people. For Young, then, such an approach reveals that groups cannot be understood as discrete entities; relationality, she argues “does not designate clear conceptual and practical borders that distinguish all members of one group decisively from members of others.”³⁴⁹ Rather, lesbians are cross-cut by racial and classed differences, among others, that cause them to relate in a variety of ways to men, heterosexual people, children, nuclear families, and many other “non-lesbian” groups.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

“Conceiving of group differentiation as a function of relation, comparison, and interaction, then,” Young writes, “allows for overlap, interspersal, and interdependence among groups and their members.”³⁵⁰ Second, and relatedly, thinking of groups through a relational lens allows one to see that groups are, in fact, incredibly heterogeneous and often characterized by internal relations of power. Lesbians, for instance, do not all relate – and have never related – to sex or to politics in the same way. Indeed, because of the ways that these complex relationships come to bear on their relative power, some members are subordinated or marginalized even within the group. A relational lens thus impels us to resist seeing a group like lesbian feminists as a “thing,” but rather as a set of relationships that helps us to look for inequalities *between* and *among* members of the group. Indeed, as I’ve argued throughout, it is precisely this relational approach that allows us to conceive of lesbian feminists not as an *identity*, but as a heterogeneous *public* cross-cut by internal relations of power. Because thinking of a group raises questions of internal hierarchies, it points us towards negotiations over responsibility and repair.

Although I will argue below that queer scholars have mischaracterized the relational dimensions of lesbian politics, it is not because they are unused to working with a relational framework altogether. Indeed, it has been easy for queer theorists to interpret the lessons of relationality as matters of method because they *do* have something to do with how we conceptualize groups and identities on a relatively abstract register. But in attempting to systematize relationality as a methodological imperative, they have

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 90.

tended to evade and misapprehend the relational political work that was central to lesbian feminist praxis for much of its history.

Let me proceed by way of an example. In a piece on “lesbian autobiographies” of the 1970s, for instance, Biddy Martin critiques lesbian writing prior to the late 1980s – here Martin cites “confessional” writing about personal experience, precisely the kind of writing found in the early pages of *Sinister Wisdom* – and argues that such writing exemplifies Young’s definition of substantive or essentialist theory. Echoing Young’s definition of essentialist lenses, for instance, Martin writes that much of early lesbian writing “[suggests] that there is something coherently different about lesbians’ lives vis-à-vis other lives and that there is something coherently the same about all lesbians.”³⁵¹ Like theorists who see identity politics as somehow opposed to politics, Martin claims that lesbians’ inability to confront or resolve differences between themselves leads them to homogenize accounts of their own experiences. In so doing, she argues, lesbian narratives tend both to *produce* the very category that they purport to explain and also *foreclose* politics – that is, contestation over differences amongst members who might understand or embody their identities differently.

Like Butler, Martin goes on to argue that, because attempts to describe a characteristically ‘lesbian’ experience – whether that experience is indexed through coming out, a common set of sexual experiences, or something else – are inherently normative and exclusionary, *all* attempts to discuss the political content of lesbian feminism have these exclusionary effects. While anthologies of lesbian writing in the

³⁵¹ Biddy Martin, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 275.

period attempted to acknowledge differences in individual lesbians' coming out experiences, she writes, they are undercut by the desire to incorporate them into a coherent conception of "lesbian feminists" as a group:

[D]ifferences, for example, of race, class, or sexuality, are finally rendered noncontradictory by virtue of their (re)presentation as differences between individuals, reducible to questions of identity within the unifying context of feminism. What remains unexamined are the systemic institutional relationships between those differences, relationships that exceed the boundaries of the lesbian community, the women's movement, or particular individuals, and in which apparently bounded communities and individuals are deeply implicated.³⁵²

On its face, Martin's claim is thus that taking the lessons of relationality seriously should give us pause when we are confronted with attempts to incorporate a wide variety of experiences into the "unifying context of feminism." A relational framework, on this view, is what reveals "lesbian writing" to be an essentialist practice.

Operating on the premise that lesbian writing prior to 1985 sought to minimize or resolve differences between lesbians, Martin then argues that this very essentialism is what caused lesbianism to "[lose] its potential as a position from which to read against the grain of narratives of normal life course, and [become] simply the affirmation of something separated out and defined as 'lesbian.'"³⁵³ The problem with lesbian writing, then, would seem to be that it has incorrectly taken itself to be a bounded category which, in turn, reproduces and reifies inequalities between and among differently situated lesbians. In response, Martin suggests that scholars might follow *queer* thinkers (here, she cites Foucault and de Lauretis) into the territory of troubling the *categories* of "experience" and "identity" "on their own grounds." Like many since, Martin chooses to

³⁵² Ibid., 275.

³⁵³ Ibid., 275.

take on this task by asking how lesbians of color challenged “lesbianism’s” essentialism. Turning especially to Cherrie Moraga’s work in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Martin argues that lesbians of color contested the very *category* of lesbianism:

Conceived [in *This Bridge Called My Back*] as women’s love for other women and for ourselves as women, lesbianism is politicized less as an identity than as a desire that transgresses the boundaries imposed by structures of race, class, ethnicity, nationality; a provocation to take responsibility for them out of the desire for different kinds of connections. Lesbianism, for Moraga, for example, is about connection but not about a total or automatic identification; it marks a desire for more complex realities, for relationships filled with struggle and risk as well as pleasure and comfort.³⁵⁴

Because it identifies lesbianism as a methodologically incorrect category, Martin thus suggests that Moraga’s is a deeply relational praxis, one in which “‘Sisterhood’ with other women of color... is achieved, not assumed; it is based on affinities and shared but not identical histories.”³⁵⁵

I would agree with Martin that Moraga’s – and, in a more general sense, lesbian of color writing throughout the 1980s – is a deeply relational kind of political praxis. This relational paradigm, however, appears in *Martin’s* text less as a way to *expand* the range of possible meanings of “lesbian feminist” or to *politicize* the term in ways that calls its internal relations of accountability into question, as I will argue Moraga’s text seeks to do. Rather, Martin interprets Moraga as contesting the inherent *methodological* essentialism of the category itself. In this way, Martin’s shifts the terrain of relationality; where it began as an incitement into politics – a way to understand identity “as something *created*, constructed in this specific world, and in the presence of complex others,” as Bickford puts it – in Martin’s telling, relationality motivates queer theory’s attempt to

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 284.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 285.

liberate lesbian theory from its presumed methodological limitations. Understanding the presence of lesbians of color not in terms of their relationship to white lesbians but as disruptive of the category “lesbians” altogether, Martin writes that

lesbianism ceases to be an identity with predictable contents... It remains a position from which to speak, to organize, to act politically, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible.³⁵⁶

In other words, ‘relationality’ for Martin is less a way of tracing the specific, contextual sites of hierarchy that inhere in relations between white lesbians and lesbians of color than it is a way of superseding the difficult work of coalition-building in the name of methodological exemplarity.

Martin’s argument that queer theory liberates lesbian feminism from its own methodological weakness is an echo of what I argued in Chapter 1 was a more general impulse in queer theory to borrow the insights of intersectional (lesbian) theorists only to claim that *queer* methodologies exceed the limits of intersectional ones. In this sense, for example, Judith Butler’s more general claim about the category ‘women’ in *Feminists Theorize the Political*: “Within feminism, it seems as if there is some political necessity to speak as for *women*,” she writes; however,

any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that the guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance*, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that ‘identity’ as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 289.

³⁵⁷ Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15-16.

Like Martin, Butler presumes that using certain methodological categories – ‘lesbian,’ say, or ‘women’ – not only signal an embedded commitment to understanding the specific processes, relationships, and subjects that are produced by hierarchy, but also smuggle in a set of normative boundaries that foreclose politics altogether. Butler goes on to argue, however, that “This is not to say that the term ‘women’ ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category.” Rather,

if feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, *to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.*³⁵⁸

In both passages by Martin and Butler, “essentialism” is transposed from Young’s usage of the term to designate a wrongful empirical and political claim – that relationships of inequality do not exist in lesbian communities – to the relatively abstract claim about the “illusory coherence and inclusiveness of the positions from which [one] is taught to see and to speak.”³⁵⁹ Both passages, then, neatly synthesize the nearly imperceptible shift from thinking of relationality in political terms – as a set of relationships that inhere within lived practices and institutions – to thinking of it *solely* in methodological terms – as a way of liberating theory from the constraints of thinking about collectivity from within relationships of inequality. In this sense, then, Martin’s argument about the

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 16. Emphasis original.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 287.

purported essentialism of lesbian narratives is a version of the more general argument about the methodological exemplarity of queer theory that I elaborated in Chapter 1.

What are the effects of such a shift? First, as I argued in my introduction, shifting from a version of relationality that seeks to understand a heterogeneous public cross-cut by relations of inequality to one that seeks to transcend ‘problematic’ categories has caused theorists to conclude that lesbianism is a form of identification that must always be relinquished. Second, as I argued in Chapter 1, the move to relinquish and transcend all ‘problematic’ methodological categories has had the paradoxical effect of evacuating the *actual* political claims – such as coalition-building – that political actors like lesbian feminists make possible. In arguing that lesbian autobiographies produced and reproduced a monolithic, essentialized identity that was only exposed as such by lesbians of color, Martin ignores (or evades) several important details about these critiques. For one, the very texts that she cites as central to the relational revolution – in particular, Moraga and Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called my Back* and Audre Lorde’s “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” both addressed below – were written by women deeply involved in the larger lesbian-feminist writing community. All three women were frequent contributors to *Sinister Wisdom*, for example: Audre Lorde’s poems “The Old Days”³⁶⁰ and “Meet”³⁶¹ are the lead pieces in *Sinister Wisdom*’s second and third issues, published in 1976 and ‘77, and many of her poems and essays appear in *SW* throughout the 1980s; Anzaldúa and Moraga both sat on the editorial board of *SW* throughout the 1980s. Characterizing

³⁶⁰ In the poem, Lorde writes powerfully that “Every one wants to know / how it was in the old days.” Audre Lorde, “The Old Days,” *Sinister Wisdom* 2 (Fall 1976): 4.

³⁶¹ “Meet” opens with the famous line “Woman when we met on the solstice / high over halfway between your world and mine.” *Sinister Wisdom* 3 (Spring 1977): 4.

them as challenging the essentialism of a predominately white, middle class group from without reduces the centrality of their longstanding contributions to the lesbian feminist political and literary communities. Rather than viewing them as critiquing lesbian feminism from outside of a group defined by its homogeneity, we might instead take Young's cue and conceive of the group "lesbian feminists" as defined by complex racial relationships from the start. On this view, Chicana, black, and indigenous lesbians did not offer the fatal blow to a methodologically flawed – and thereby politically exclusive – group; they were part of an ongoing negotiation between white lesbians and lesbians of color over how (or if) the group would take responsibility for its internal racial inequalities.

I share Martin's concerns about any lesbian politics that refuses to acknowledge or call to account for inequalities inherent in the movement. Nevertheless, such attempts to understand these inequalities as ways to liberate a queer politics from the difficult coalitional questions detailed in *lesbian* narratives, rather than as a process of political negotiation over the responsibility to address inequality, ignore what is arguably Young's most basic and important argument about the dangers of essentialism. For Young, entire groups *themselves* are never essentializable; even in groups that may wish for internal unity and coherence (as some white lesbians undoubtedly did), in reality relationships of inequality between members doggedly persist.³⁶² We cannot rightfully claim that the

³⁶² In fact, Young goes so far as to say that "Social relationships, institutions, and structures are prior to individual subjects, both temporally and ontologically." However, this is not to say that groups are created in monolithic or simplistic ways. Citing her article "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), for instance, she writes that groups constituted in and through society are, at all times, *internally* relational: "the gender position of being a woman does

group “lesbians” was ever a coherent, bounded, or homogenous group, regardless of whether some members sought to enact such unity. While we might critique the ways in which conceptual categories like “identity” tend to an aspirational homogeneity, we haven’t truly taken the lessons of relationality to heart until we learn to see that these differences are symptoms of larger patterns of inequality between and amongst members positioned differently *within* the group. Moreover, in reading lesbian feminism of the 1980s as uniformly resistant to confronting these relationships, analyses like Martin’s tend to inadvertently reduce what was, in fact, a complex set of negotiations over the very meaning of “lesbianism” to a single, overdetermined ideological position. Ironically, then, even as texts like Martin’s advance a relational framework in their methodologies, they reduce the actual practices of groups like lesbians to rarefied entities.

Following Young’s appeal to a more politically relational frame, then, I would argue that rather than dismissing the lesbian politics of the 1970s through the early 90s as an *essentially* undemocratic identity that was challenged from without, we might instead ask how conflicts over authority between and among differently positioned lesbians inflected their political claims as a group. Doing so, I think, would have several important consequences. First, it would direct attention away from the inherent essentialism of the *category* of identity and train it once again on the hierarchical, complex, and polyvalent relationships that inhere between and among lesbian feminists. These relationships are not only material ones – they also exemplify what Margaret Urban Walker has described

not itself imply sharing social attributes and identity with all those others called women. Instead, ‘women’ is the name of a series in which some individuals find themselves positioned by virtue of norms of enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor.” *Inclusion and Democracy*, 100.

as “relationships of accountability.” According to Walker, such relationships are ones which “[consist] in suffering the demands of others on us to render accounts of our conduct and, where our conduct is unexcused, accepting responsibility and in turn enjoying the standing to make similar claims upon others.”³⁶³ Walker argues that what is at stake in matters of injustice – matters such as the issue of racism or transphobia in lesbian feminism – “is whether those wronged possess the standing to *call to account* those who have wronged them or to bear responsibility for the repair of the wrongs they have suffered.”³⁶⁴ This is precisely the kind of relationality that one finds in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*. Unlike queer theorists, who have interpreted the inexhaustibility of difference in lesbian/queer relationships as evidence of “a field of intractable, highly structured discursive incoherence at a crucial node of social organization” and who have argued, following Eve Sedgwick, that “the more promising [political?] project would seem to be a study of the incoherent dispensation itself,”³⁶⁵ the lesbian politics I present here understand difference as an imperative to recognize, and to call to account, unequal moral standings.

My point is not that white lesbians have always accepted or welcomed the kinds of politics that marginalized lesbians like Moraga have advanced; they certainly have not.³⁶⁶ Rather, when we fail to acknowledge that “lesbian feminism” has always been a

³⁶³ Margaret Urban Walker, “Moral Vulnerability and the Task of Reparations,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 119.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶⁵ Eve Sedgwick, “Epistemology of the Closet,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 90.

³⁶⁶ As I argued in Chapter 2, for instance, some readers of *Sinister Wisdom* balked at claims made by writers like Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith about the persistence and

group defined by its complex, often unresolved negotiations over real relations of authority and subordination, we also fail to see how differently situated lesbians have long attempted to create a kind of space, together, wherein every member would possess the moral standing to call others to account. The lesbian politics of relationality that I outline below may not “overcome” problems of racism, classism, or transphobia by recognizing that identity is inherently incoherent. But they do represent a way of grappling with these relations of authority and subordination as they are lived and experienced – in other words, as they register *politically*. More than that, though, they represent a process by which groups might foster relationships in which *all* members of the group, though they act from within real inequalities, “possess a certain moral status as full participants in reciprocal accountability relations.”³⁶⁷

Moral Vulnerability and Repair in Sinister Wisdom

So far, I have argued that understanding lesbian politics as the inherently “essentialist” cousin of queer theory transposes the lessons of relationality from a political to a methodological register. In the process of this transposition, I have suggested, queer theorists have tended to mischaracterize the practices and processes that existed *within* and *among* lesbian communities for negotiating relationships of authority and subordination. This is not an abstract claim; serious attention to the extensive archives of lesbian political work reveal that conversations about how to establish practices that would promote such forms of accountability were important to lesbian

prevalence of racism in lesbian feminism, arguing that these attempts to call attention to the persistence of power in lesbian feminism constituted a kind of reverse racism.

³⁶⁷ Walker, “Moral Vulnerability,” 112.

political thinking from the late 1970s onward. In this section, then, I focus on two conversations, each taking place in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom* between the years 1980 and 1985, to argue that the forms of relational accountability discussed above were central to its contributors' sense of theory-making. What I mean by this is *not* that lesbians have seamlessly or collectively understood, from the get-go, how to build coalitions that avoid internal relations of power between and amongst their members. Rather, I mean that these contributors are participants in a process by which they seek to engage one another as "full participants in reciprocal accountability relations." This process, I argue, entails three key elements. First, it must begin with the *expectation* of reciprocal accountability. Second, it entails an expression of moral vulnerability – the sense that the expectation of reciprocal accountability has been breached or betrayed. Finally, it entails an effort to *repair*, not resolve or transcend, these unequal relationships.

Conversation One: Barbara and Beverly Smith, Sinister Wisdom 18, 1981

In June, 1980, Beverly and Barbara Smith sat down "across the kitchen table," as the piece later became known, with Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa for an interview. The piece, which is best known for its appearance in *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981, also appeared in *Sinister Wisdom*'s 18th issue the same year. In her preface to the first edition to *This Bridge*, Moraga wrote that the motivation for the book – surely shared across the contributors, including the Smith sisters – was living through "the deepest political tragedy I have experienced... how with such grace, such blind faith, [the] commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and

reactionary.”³⁶⁸ At a glance, Moraga’s *This Bridge* preface seems to resonate with Kathy Rudy’s claim that “We [lesbians] began policing ourselves in order to guarantee that our members were faithful to the principle of putting women first,” and that such policing meant that issues of racial inequality were never raised – or were effectively silenced – within early lesbian politics.³⁶⁹ However, a closer reading of Moraga’s stated political motivations reveals a different context for her sense of tragedy. Rather than insisting that her Third World feminism emerges from a different source entirely and generates a fundamentally incompatible kind of politics, as Rudy and Martin might suggest, Moraga instead insists that her goal is to think from *within* the very premise of lesbian politics at that time: that women could forge new, mutually accountable relationships with one another. “I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology,” she writes; “I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because I couldn’t stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously.”³⁷⁰

Throughout the preface, Moraga strongly emphasizes the promise of acknowledging the lived dimensions of relationships between women – for example, the emotional relationships that inhere in shared experiences, or the physical and spiritual relationships it is possible to build between women positioned differently in the world. But she also notes the deeply unresolved dangers of such relationships – for example, in her running metaphor of the geographical relationships between the differently raced

³⁶⁸ Cherrie Moraga, “La Jornada,” in *This Bridge Called my Back*, ed. Moraga and Anzaldúa. (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983 [1981]); pp. xiv.

³⁶⁹ See Kathy Rudy, “Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 27 no. 1 (2001): 190-222.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

spaces of Boston – by noting that attempts at reciprocal accountability are tinged with the possibility of persistent, unacknowledged, “underground” inequalities. For Moraga, “lesbianism” itself is what links the promise and the risk of creating relationships between women. “I am a lesbian,” she writes; “I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt... Lesbianism is supposed to be about connection.”³⁷¹

If lesbian relationships, for Moraga, are of a double quality in that they both promise connection and contain the “potential betrayal, rejection, and failure that lives throughout the first and last gesture of connection,”³⁷² then Moraga’s piece and many of the other contributions to *This Bridge* explore the harms caused when such attempts to forge truly reciprocal relationships fail. In other words, it explores what happens to individuals and to groups when mutual accountability between and among its members is *not* achieved. Such harms are what Walker describes as symptoms of a particular form of inequality she names “moral vulnerability.” For Walker, while most social relationships depend on a sense of reciprocity – that is, on the “assumption that we possess a certain moral status as full participants in reciprocal accountability relations,”³⁷³ moral vulnerability occurs when these relationships break down, become asymmetrical, or are betrayed by one of the parties. As she puts it,

All of us who see ourselves as possessing this status anticipate that we are rightly able to call others to account even as we ourselves are rightly liable to be called to account by others. The vulnerability in question is the potential for being exposed to the insult and additional injury, when we perceive ourselves wronged, of

³⁷¹ Ibid., xiv.

³⁷² Ibid., xviii.

³⁷³ Walker, “Moral Vulnerability,” 112.

having our standing to call others to account denied, dismissed, or ignored in ways that call our very status as full participants into question.³⁷⁴

If Moraga envisions *This Bridge* as a first step towards acknowledging injustices born of relations of power and authority internal to lesbianism, then we might reinterpret her claims of injury less as critiques by an excluded “other” than as the invocation of a relationship of moral vulnerability from *within* these relations. From this angle of vision, Third World feminism is, then, an attempt to address the asymmetrical relationships that “call our very status as full participants into question” – not so much to *overcome* these harms as to call their perpetrators to account, to help her “make sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury.”

Viewed in this context, *This Bridge Called My Back* is the attempt among lesbians of color to define “that deep place of knowledge” – to name a relationship of moral vulnerability from within the lesbian feminist movement. The choice to publish central pieces of that effort in *Sinister Wisdom*, then, would appear to be an attempt, as Moraga put it, to “call my white sisters on this;” that is, to invite white women to recognize and account for their contributions to that moral vulnerability.³⁷⁵ Beverly and Barbara Smith’s conversation in *Sinister Wisdom 18* speaks particularly well to this task. The sisters, who were two of the three contributing members of the Combahee River Collective, spend considerable time recounting everyday experiences that, together, give a name to the “grinding” injury that comes with not only being harmed, but *also* with having one’s

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

³⁷⁵ Several pieces from *This Bridge* appeared in *Sinister Wisdom 18*, including Chrystos’ “I walk in the History of My People,” Gabrielle Daniels’ “Millicent Fredericks,” hattie gossett’s “billie lieves! billie lives!,” and Barbara and Beverly Smith’s “Across the Kitchen Table.”

peers fail to acknowledge or accept those harms as credible. Speaking about a variety of issues ranging from lesbian separatism to homophobia in the black community, the Smiths both critique lesbian feminism as a site of moral vulnerability and hold out hope for its ability to establish a set of reparative practices that might build from, if not attenuate, its inequalities.

A prominent theme of the interview, for example, is the tragedy of having abandoned one's community for a new one promising reciprocal accountability, only to have that expectation go unacknowledged and, at times, actively dismissed. On the one hand, the sisters describe the extent to which they feel that "everyone who has our identity" (that is, black lesbians) "has to sacrifice" connections to the black community. As Beverly put it in the interview, not only "is... there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice" in the women's movement,

It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise... I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well, do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" And I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing!"³⁷⁶

Yet while Beverly expresses the act of leaving behind the cultural forms of one's childhood as a difficult but at times necessary step for feminists, she is also clearly pointing out how difficult it is to exist in a movement in which the pain of that act is not recognized or understood by one's peers. The white woman in her anecdote, for example, has no context in which to understand how Beverly Smith, a black lesbian feminist, might

³⁷⁶ Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," in *Sinister Wisdom* 18, (1983): 68.

long for the kinds of celebrations of belonging that place someone in the black community. Worse, however, is the inability to name this sense of tragedy from *within* a movement that has no process for acknowledging and repairing these harms. Shortly after discussing the injury of having left one's community for feminism, for instance, Beverly continues, "Some separatists believe that although women are racist [...], when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have."³⁷⁷ In other words, not only have black lesbians suffered a kind of injury by having left behind specific modes of belonging and experiencing racism, but this injury is compounded by the dismissal of these claims by the very people with whom they have been promised reciprocal relationships. Like Moraga, Beverly's expression of injury is rooted in the fact that, despite the promise of reciprocal accountability in lesbian politics, these relationships carry the ongoing risk of failure. Moral vulnerability, as in Moraga's preface to *This Bridge*, appears as a failure of white lesbians to "have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period."³⁷⁸

Both Barbara and Beverly insist, then, that acknowledging the "class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which 'high level' analysis and rhetoric don't get to"³⁷⁹ must be a priority for any lesbian feminism that hopes to live up to its own relational promise. Ultimately, however, for both Barbara and Beverly the task at hand is to *repair* the relationships between white and black women; to critically evaluate "who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

face you can touch.”³⁸⁰ “There are bunches of white women,” they add, “for whom these things that I’ve mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color;”³⁸¹ this is, I would argue, precisely the asymmetry that has created a condition of moral vulnerability for lesbians of color. Crucially, however, rather than advocating for the abandonment of lesbian politics in favor of some fundamentally new praxis, the Smith sisters argue that they see the main task of lesbians as acknowledging and repairing the relationships of mutual accountability that lesbianism promises – not presuming to transcend issues of inequality between women altogether. Repairing these relationships, the sisters insist, would be truly radical precisely because the task of repairing relations of moral vulnerability is so seldom undertaken. As Barbara put it,

I read in a women’s newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before...³⁸²

After acknowledging that such a “coalition politics” would neither overcome nor ignore inequalities between and among differently positioned lesbians, the sisters point out that these inequalities serve as the *occasion* for reflection on accountability. As Beverly puts it,

The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we’re the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic... Third World women are not in actual leadership positions in the women’s movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision. We are in the position to challenge

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 72.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 72.

³⁸² Ibid., 75.

the feminist movement as it stands to date and not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival.³⁸³

Like Moraga, then, the Smith sisters argue that what is at stake in acknowledging racism within the lesbian movement is the very possibility of accounting for the lived inequalities between and among women. While they argue that the process of accounting is a potentially dangerous one, it is also necessary. Their perspective on lesbian political praxis, then, echoes Bernice Johnson Reagon, who succinctly expresses the dual promise and risk of coalition politics: “Coalition *can* kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal.”³⁸⁴

Conversation Two: Elly Bulkin on White Lesbian Racism, Sinister Wisdom 13, 1980

Moral vulnerability, I have suggested, is occasioned by the *expectation* of reciprocity; that is, it is what happens when relations of reciprocal accountability fail. The lesbian context, precisely *because* it promised a deeply relational political praxis, could become the scene of these critiques of its failures for lesbians of color. In the context of *Sinister Wisdom*, then, pieces like “Across the Kitchen Table” attempt to name these failures, to contextualize them in a specific set of hierarchical relationships, and to define when and how these practices of mutual accountability break down. Of course, though, it is one thing for lesbians of color to write, share, and critique from a position of moral vulnerability, and another altogether for the privileged within a movement to *acknowledge and account* for the conditions of that vulnerability and to establish

³⁸³ Ibid., 76.

³⁸⁴ Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” 361.

processes by which they can repair relationships of accountability. Indeed, questions about whether *white* lesbians, collectively, could or would account for these inequalities are at the heart of concerns about lesbian essentialism.

Throughout *Sinister Wisdom*'s run, white lesbians have debated over how to come to terms with claims about moral vulnerability put forth by writers of color like Moraga, Anzaldúa, the Smith sisters, and other frequent contributors such as Beth Brant, Audre Lorde, and Michelle Cliff. Yet while practices such as drawing attention to the racial identities of editors and contributors, publishing special issues on indigeneity and racism,³⁸⁵ and frequently publishing and reviewing important works of Third World lesbian feminism were all central to *Sinister Wisdom*'s mission, these practices could not capture the kind of accountability that the Smiths demand in "Across the Kitchen Table." Indeed, although the editorial note in the first issue of *SW* in 1976 included a discussion of racism, the unequal moral standing implicit in the discussions above remained. "A central part of our vision has been to exorcise the unconscious and therefore most deadly forms of racism in the feminist movement," then-editor Harriet Desmoines writes,

But here we are with Issue I, birthed white as the day is long. Meridel Leseur said this about a white woman and an Indian woman: "The two women had lived a parallel life curiously knowing each other, but the Indian was the knower. Something in the white woman willed not to know... willed to evade the final knowing." And so it is with white lesbians.³⁸⁶

As so many pieces by lesbians of color had argued, Desmoines suggests that problems of racism in *Sinister Wisdom* are a kind of double harm – first, as the harm of racism itself,

³⁸⁵ See, for example, *A Gathering of Spirit: Native Women's Issue* edited by Beth Brant.

³⁸⁶ Harriet Desmoines, "Notes for a Magazine," *Sinister Wisdom* 1, (1976): 30.

and second, as the *willful* refusal to acknowledge or recognize these harms by one's so-called sisters.

By 1980, however, white contributors to *SW* began taking seriously the claims about moral vulnerability that pepper lesbian of color writing, attempting to acknowledge that white women's willingness "to evade the final knowing" was something for which they needed to take responsibility. The first major piece reflecting on the responsibilities of white women to account for race and racism in *Sinister Wisdom* appears in its thirteenth issue. Elly Bulkin's piece, entitled "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics" is an attempt by a Jewish lesbian, concerned with the claims of moral vulnerability expressed in pieces like those mentioned above, to examine what it would take to repair – not transcend – the relations of accountability that have been damaged by moral vulnerability.³⁸⁷ Bulkin's is an argument, in a word, about the *moral standing* of lesbians of color to impel white women to reflect on the responsibilities they bear for harms like those described in *This Bridge*. In this sense, then, her reflections constitute a process by which she seeks to make "more precise sense of... what is at stake in redress."³⁸⁸

In her piece, Bulkin describes a process by which reflection on homophobia serves as an occasion for reflection on racism. Here, homophobia is neither an analogy to, nor a pass for, racism; it is an occasion to acknowledge the unresolved hierarchies of authority that exist within lesbian communities, a practice that she argues is essential for

³⁸⁷ Bulkin is also the co-author of *Yours in Struggle: Three Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* with Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith. (New York: Long Haul Press, 1984).

³⁸⁸ Walker, "Moral Vulnerability," pp. 125.

repairing those contexts in which the lesbian promise of reciprocal accountability has failed. In one example, Bulkin describes having “called out” straight women presenters at the widely-attended *Second Sex at 30* conference for having ignored issues of homophobia within the women’s movement, but also having failed to call out their racism. The presenters, she writes, “just spoke as if all women writers – with the exception of Alice Walker – were both heterosexual and white.” They had discussed Adrienne Rich, “but not as a lesbian; Alice Walker was praised, but seen only within the context of a white women’s literary tradition.” Bulkin describes her reaction as follows:

After some discussion, I objected to the heterosexism of the presentations and met first with embarrassed silence and then with the assurance that, of course, they were all well aware of lesbian writing – it just didn’t happen to receive attention in these particular papers. Going home on the subway, I realized that I could well have objected to the white solipsism of the presentations and didn’t – caught as I was in the immediacy of my anger at my own oppression. The following day, given a chance to speak at an open mike, I made the connections I had failed to make the day before.³⁸⁹

For Bulkin, the fact that homophobia and racism are so closely intertwined presents an opportunity to reflect on how they produce complex patterns of inequality that come to bear on what one does or does not notice, the kinds of accountability one demands or accepts, and what happens when the expectation of accountability fails. “I mention [the *Second Sex* conference],” she writes, “as neither mea culpa nor simple success story, but as a way of beginning to look at the dynamics and socializing factors that interfere with our confronting racism, both in ourselves and in other white women. For I assume that

³⁸⁹ Elly Bulkin, “Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics,” *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (1980): 4.

I/we do not have to be non-racist in order to be anti-racist. For me this has been a crucial realization.”³⁹⁰

After noting how her own “solipsism” had prevented her from speaking out about issues of race and racism for too long, Bulkin turns to consider what it would look like to start to *repair* relations in which reciprocal accountability has failed. For Bulkin, the process of repair requires two crucial recognitions. First, repair means taking account of the many ways that race and racism have been actively excluded from one’s frame for understanding oppression. In her article, for instance, Bulkin describes several such instances in which she was taught to ignore – at times, to willfully dismiss – her own entanglement in racism. She recalls, first, how her grandmother “[referred] to Black people as “schwartzes,” dropping a word of Yiddish into a stream of English sentences and thereby impressing on me... that “they” (and, by extension, other people of color) were so alien to my white world that their very existence could not be acknowledged in my own language.”³⁹¹ Later, in the mid-50s, she writes that her parents “[spoke] with the simple superiority of Northern liberals about civil rights for Black people in the South... For them, racism was floating around someplace out there... and if I only believed in the equality of all people, I would be forever safe from the corrosion in my grandmother’s message.”³⁹² For Bulkin, the anecdotes suggest more than an excuse for not having recognized racism; they represent her own entanglement in, and willingness to, ignore internal relations of moral vulnerability within feminism. Recognizing that one is not only confronted by “difference,” but is rather shaped from within hierarchies of

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 5.

³⁹² Ibid., 5.

acceptability, she argues, is necessary for her to be able to *hear* claims of moral vulnerability as such.

Second, and relatedly, Bulkin defines the reparative process as one that acknowledges that “anti-racist” is different from “non-racist.” What this means, practically, is that accountability can occur in situations where inequality is still present, and that a group need not *solve* relations of moral accountability to begin to repair them. On the one hand, Bulkin suggests that a process a repair must refuse to accept the idea that these inequalities can be solved at the level of analysis:

The concept of racism itself is often intellectualized by white feminists ... It is possible to make obeisance to the abstract existence of racism, even to work politically on issues of immediate concern to black and Third World women, such as sterilization abuse, out of an intellectual right-mindedness which actually distances us from the point where black and white women have to begin together.³⁹³

White lesbians cannot, she suggests here, absolve themselves of racist legacies by reconceptualizing racism as problems of “difference” that one is either for or against. Neither can white lesbians “defer” problems of racism by “[waiting] for the never-never-day when we will be blameless enough to speak.”³⁹⁴ Although white lesbians like Bulkin are irrevocably entangled and invested in the kinds of hierarchies that lesbians of color critique, Bulkin argues that deferring the problem will only further entrench white women’s unwillingness to recognize moral vulnerabilities. Rather than assume that one must be “non-racist” – to be absolved of all guilt – to confront issues of racism, then,

³⁹³ Ibid., 5.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

Bulkin suggests that lesbians recognize that “the issue... is not to belabor this reality, but to explore what can, in fact, still be done in spite of it.”³⁹⁵

Bulkin’s approach to redress – her insistence that it emphasize relations of acceptability rather than straightforward exclusions, as well as her claim that white lesbians’ accountability will remain partial and imbricated in relations of inequality – may seem dissatisfying to those used to queer theory’s more concise methodological move. For Bulkin, at issue in instances of moral repair is decidedly *not* to recognize that the category of identity is inherently fractured, or to insist that fundamentally different experiences of sexuality ought to call into question or transcend the promises and practices lesbianism themselves. Rather, her attempt to take account of white lesbians’ contributions to relations of moral vulnerability evokes Walker’s discussion of reparations. For Walker, “Once moral vulnerability is recognized as the underlying issue in redressing wrongs,” we must attend to those harms *only* in ways that “track the contours of the kind and extent of moral vulnerability that is at issue.”³⁹⁶ In other words, there is no conceptually *correct* way to address moral vulnerabilities; there are only practices that, as Bulkin puts it, “[invest] with inescapable concreteness the concept of racism... [practices which spring] from that synthesis of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical thinking, which is at the core of the feminist process.”³⁹⁷ Like Walker, who argues that while “with respect to the future, reparations can only at best set an example and make a promise or a commitment based on what is achieved in the

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁹⁶ Walker, “Moral Vulnerability,” 124.

³⁹⁷ Bulkin, “Racism and Writing,” 5.

present instance,”³⁹⁸ Bulkin suggests that repairing racial inequalities in the lesbian movement will not require a final solution, but an open-ended commitment to re-establishing relations of accountability that have been breached or betrayed. The responsibility, she writes, must be to address “the most basic of questions: What will we undertake?”³⁹⁹

This final point not only illuminates the process by which white lesbians can be called to account for their contributions to moral vulnerability, but also suggests that the way forward, for those committed to a relational political praxis, is uncertain and fragile. It underscores, for example, Audre Lorde’s final statement in her “Open Letter to Mary Daly:”

The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women’s words, to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope.”⁴⁰⁰

What does it mean to engage in the process of “shaping our future,” of entering into the “process of shattering and passing beyond”? For Bulkin and Lorde, I would argue, the process must be one of reciprocal accountability – a promise both radical and fragile, and one fraught with difficult decisions about how to move forward together. Those committed to a lesbian politics of relationality must bear in mind, they seem to suggest,

³⁹⁸ Walker, “Moral Vulnerability,” 127.

³⁹⁹ Bulkin, “Racism and Writing,” 19.

⁴⁰⁰ Audre Lorde. “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *Sister Outsider*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 71.

questions like the ones raised by Adrienne Rich in *SW 18*: “What makes us believe these decisions can be simple, and who wants us to over-simplify them?”⁴⁰¹

Lesbian Avengers on the Ground

If *Sinister Wisdom* demonstrates that lesbian politics was both deeply relational (in the sense that it encompassed not only “differences” between women but relationships of inequality within the movement) and reflexive (in the sense that it sought to establish practices in which injured members could call others to account for their actions and erasures), then it is clearly inaccurate to describe lesbian politics as inherently “essentialist.” However, although “lesbian politics” have gone out of style, the lessons found in lesbian archives like *Sinister Wisdom* continue to be associated primarily, if not exclusively, with a *queer* theory and politics most associate with the early 1990s. In this section, then, I further complicate queer theory’s exclusive claim on relational and reflexive politics by showing that the more grounded meaning of relationality I explored in the sections above were, in fact, strong influences in 90s-era queer politics.

As a group, the Lesbian Avengers have often been understood as participants in the queer wave of the 1990s alongside groups like ACTUp and Queer Nation. Because they are known best for an aggressive style of public politics that transgresses traditional protest tactics (their actions are best known for their spectacle-like quality, often including fire-eating, topless demonstrations, and purposeful skirting of permit laws), many queer theorists have argued that the group promoted a style of politics that transgressed categories of experience in ways that echo Biddy Martin’s reading of *This*

⁴⁰¹ Adrienne Rich, “Notes for a Magazine: What does Separatism Mean?” *Sinister Wisdom 18*, (1983): 88.

Bridge Called My Back.⁴⁰² Yet while the Avengers certainly brought a 1990s panache to their organizing, I argue here that many of their underlying political commitments reflect precisely the concern for uneven relations of accountability that had developed in earlier lesbian theory. To make this case, I turn now to the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project (LACROP), an effort the Avengers began in the fall of 1993 to repeal local discrimination ordinances. According to the Lesbian Avengers' Organizing Handbook, "the idea was for LACROP to focus on national mobilization against the onslaught of statewide anti-lesbian and -gay initiatives promoted by the Christian Right." "At that point," the handbook reads, "we all knew that we were after the magical sight of powerful, out dykes fighting back; we just weren't sure what that meant logistically. So we picked up the phone and started calling around to find out."⁴⁰³ The Lesbian Avengers, in documenting their experiences of organizing "against the Right," detail several key lessons that reflect their deep engagement with the relational politics of the earlier lesbian community.

First, the LACROP project emerged on the premise that it was possible to build reciprocal relationships of accountability, despite having to grapple with distinct forms of power, authority, and inequality within the movement. LACROP began, for instance, in direct response to what its members saw as aggressive attempts to curb to political and strategic participation of rural, non-elite lesbian and gays. "As we gathered information from dykes in each state facing the possibility of a ballot initiative that campaign year,"

⁴⁰² Indeed, Sarah Schulman (one of the Lesbian Avengers' founding members) cites a new *style* of political organizing as the most profound difference between 1980s and 1990s-era lesbian politics. See *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁰³ Lesbian Avengers, "Out Against the Right: An Organizing Handbook" (1995).

their handbook reads, “it became clear that in each case there was one unified state-wide campaign which had almost all the money and resources available in that state.” They continue,

These state-wide campaigns often shared a mainstream political vision which did not include or even permit any other kinds of organizing. We found that there were plenty of dykes wanting to do out, visible grassroots organizing, but they had no support. Many saw their only options as (1) to do work within the tightly controlled framework of the mainstream campaigns (one state-wide campaign actually required volunteers to sign agreements about what they would and wouldn’t say and do during the campaign), or (2) to try to work on their own without the benefit of any of the resources, money, research materials, skills, and support systems that were provided by national mainstream lesbian and gay individuals and organizations.⁴⁰⁴

For the Lesbian Avengers, the vast power differentials between elite – and mainstream – LGBT organizations and the rural, relatively powerless people for whom they were ostensibly organizing, meant that

These dykes, who wanted to fight the initiatives without giving up their political style or independence, were under siege twice: once by the Christian Right, which deliberately chose to target regions where queers were isolated and had relatively small support systems, and again by the mainstream campaigns, which wanted to control the strategy for everyone and were not willing to share what scarce resources there were.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ In her article “Gay Politics in the Heartland: With the Lesbian Avengers in Idaho,” printed in *The Nation* in 1995, Sara Pursley expands on this dynamic, writing that “Last August ... the Boise group [of No on One] hired a full-time staff and formulated a centralized campaign plan with technical and financial assistance... from the Human Rights Campaign Fund, Gay and Lesbian Americans and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The shift toward centralization and “message control” had many implications for people working on the Proposition One campaign. To become a volunteer in the Boise office of No on 1, for example, the applicant would have to sign a form stating that she would not talk to the press, write articles or send in letters to the editor about Proposition One without approval from the executive committee. These rules were intended to “control the message,” and effectively precluded rural volunteers from promoting lesbian and gay visibility in the press,” 92.

⁴⁰⁵ Lesbian Avengers LACROP file, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

The Lesbian Avengers, like many involved in lesbian politics before them, were deeply skeptical of the idea that a successful coalition could be built on the premise of a party line – a line which would be defined by an elite group of “mainstream” actors asking marginalized group members to remain on the sidelines. Just as feminists had insisted that subsuming “sex oppression” under class analysis was a form of sexism, just as lesbians had insisted that issues facing lesbian women were distinct from “the patriarchy,” and just as lesbians of color had insisted that any lesbianism premised only on white women’s leadership would be a failure, the Lesbian Avengers recognized that such a hierarchical organization would, ultimately, be an unviable politics.

With this recognition of the dangers of non-relational political movements in mind, the Lesbian Avengers set out to “offer long-term, day-to-day support that would allow us to work with local activists, and would create an atmosphere of mutual learning and political growth for the duration of the campaign and beyond.”⁴⁰⁶ Conceptually, the Avengers note that this grassroots approach to organizing must emphasize localized work across a variety of perspectives, positions, and approaches: “campaigns can and have been won,” they write, “by lots of different lesbians doing lots of different things with lots of different messages.” However, they strongly emphasize the need to attend to the potential inequalities that will result from a geographically diffuse and resource imbalanced movement like LACROP. Because the “Christian Right,” they argue, “targets low-income communities, rural areas, and communities of color,” the LACROP’s “ethical and political perspective” instead emphasizes the responsibility to attend to the inequalities that inhere *within* the group:

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

Many traditional campaign groups... have virtually ignored low-income and rural regions and communities of color based on the assumption that these communities are not valuable voting blocks, they're too small, too dispersed, too homophobic, or they're probably not registered or willing to register to vote, anyway. Dykes and fags who live in these areas are ignored [...] As we wrote in our 1994 "Out Against the Right" Manifesto, "We will not accept superficial legal rights for some lesbians and gay men at the expense of real human rights for all of us." Butch, femme, and androgynous dykes, lesbians and gay men of color, drag queens, lesbian and gay youth, transsexuals, people with AIDS, lesbians and gays with disabilities, and rural lesbians and gay men will not be sacrificed in the name of "campaign strategy."⁴⁰⁷

By emphasizing localized, grass-roots organizing and a shared responsibility to attend to a wide range of existing inequalities within the movement, the Lesbian Avengers thus extend the *promise* of reciprocal accountability that characterized earlier lesbian politics.

However, LACROP members, particularly in the Idaho "No on One" campaign, were particularly susceptible to claims of moral vulnerability made by local organizers. Like the contributors to *Sinister Wisdom*, LACROP organizers soon learned that the promise of reciprocal accountability comes with the risk that these relations will fail. While the Avengers themselves collected and curated a number of letters attesting to their unbridled success (a typical response reads "I'm finally sitting down to write this long overdue thank you [...] A thank you for teaching us how to be Lesbian Avengers, to organize, to get wild... and a thank you for being you are and helping to create a supportive environment in which we could all grow and truly be who we are"⁴⁰⁸), a good deal of evidence also attests to the fragility of the relations of accountability the Avengers sought to establish. Despite the Avengers' best efforts to ensure that their relational praxis could keep them accountable for the internal hierarchies their organizing would

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

elicit, these relations were not always truly reciprocal as promised. “I know you wouldn’t want people to have the mistaken impression that the Avengers came to North Idaho and single-handedly defeated the Idaho Citizens Alliance,” one open letter to the Lesbian Avengers reads,

but when you use titles like “Avengers Defeat the Christian Right in Rural Idaho” and write that “county returns on Proposition 1 indicate that LACROP’s strategy worked,” people might get the wrong idea. It would be helpful to mention that there had been an 18-month campaign against radical right propaganda that had taken place before the Avengers ever arrived in the area: led for the most part by the Latah/Nez Perce Voices for Human Rights, a coalition of gays and straights organized in early 1993.⁴⁰⁹

Another letter, also published in the newspaper *Diversity* in 1995, names more explicitly a relationship of moral vulnerability by describing the “shame,” “anger,” and “fear” the Avengers elicited in her:

The Avengers have haloed themselves with an aura of arrogance. They imply it was their efforts that made the difference in a very close vote and of course it was their “recruit” campaign that increased gay participation. Who is to say what worked and what didn’t?

What I do know is that many of their activities offend and embarrass me. I feel shame when I hear stories of women licking each others’ faces and baring their breasts at a local airport as a high salute to departing Avengers. I feel anger whenever I see a shirt sloganed with “we recruit” since it undermines others’ attempts to correct a stereotypical myth. I feel fear when they recruit people into making public statements with little regard for the consequences. It is so easy to become intoxicated for the moment without considering the hangover they will awaken to tomorrow.

At a recent meeting I listened to a father who lost his job following his son’s appearance at a town meeting the Avengers co-sponsored. While the Avengers will proclaim how wonderful the event was, they neglect to tell “the rest of the story.”⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

A third writer suggests, quite pointedly, that “if the Lesbian Avengers want to do something really radical, and engage in true anarchy, they embark on an intensive journey of self-examination. There’s an action that would benefit us all.”⁴¹¹ If the Lesbian Avengers had promised a praxis built on relations of reciprocal accountability, many of their co-organizers argued passionately about the breaches of this promise – that is, the moral vulnerability – that they experienced during the actual campaign.

Finally, the experience in Idaho caused the New York Lesbian Avengers group to develop a process for accounting for these kinds of claims in their organizing. While they do not find a way to *resolve* or *overcome* these inequalities, they emphasize the extent to which it is necessary to actively confront them. Their efforts echo Bulkin’s attempts to establish a process whereby the group examines the criteria of acceptability that govern their collective decisions. In a reflective piece on the relative value of polling research, for instance, the Avengers note that

... we do not believe in constructing a single message based on poll results. The ‘single-message’ mentality inhibits our diverse communities and individuals from defining our own roles in the movement, based on what matters to us as lesbian and gay people under attack. *The single most important factor in these campaigns is our community – mobilizing it, defending it, strengthening it.* By community we do not mean one unified, single-voiced, monolithic mass. Nor do we mean a pool of volunteers waiting to be plucked out and sent to lick postage stamps for the people who determine the message. We mean widely diverse lesbian and gay people with different histories, priorities, and political strategies. So prioritizing the community during the campaign does not mean sacrificing individual and group differences for the “good of the whole” and conforming to the so-called scientific message. It means ensuring that everyone is given full opportunity and encouragement to express what the campaign means to them. And this always, necessarily, no matter what, means a multiplicity of messages. People will say they can do both – they can’t.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

For the Avengers, the lessons of politics are not to discover the “right” side, but to think relationally about the forms of power and authority that inhere in any political effort. In the end, the lessons that the Lesbian Avengers learned in Idaho were not so different from Adrienne Rich’s conclusion in the earlier context of *Sinister Wisdom* – that the questions, at bottom are ““What makes us believe these decisions can be simple, and who wants us to over-simplify them?”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that although lesbianism is often seen as *essentially* essentialist, especially in relation to queer theory, quite a different picture emerges when we take seriously the ways that uneven, often contested relations between and among lesbian feminists played into the group’s political praxis. First, I have argued that the figure of “the essentialist lesbian” in queer theory is less a political or historical reality than an effect of queer theorists’ transposition of the political lessons of relationality into a methodological register. Second, in contrast to queer theory’s transposition of the lessons of relationality into problems of “incorrect” categories, I have argued that lesbian feminists involved in communities like *Sinister Wisdom* sought to understand how relations of inequality produced what I have argued are best described as moral vulnerabilities. Documenting how lesbians of color named and developed their understanding of relations of moral vulnerability from *within* the lesbian movement, I have argued, throws the promise of reciprocal accountability in lesbian feminism into stark relief against their characterization as “essentialist” within queer theory. Equally, understanding inequalities within lesbian politics as failures of accountability also shows

how both white lesbians and lesbians of color sought to inaugurate an uncertain and fragile practice of moral repair that exceeds our contemporary understandings of politically “correct” methods and frameworks for dealing with difference. Finally, I have argued that when we understand lesbian politics to have contributed a distinctive relational political praxis, we can start to observe important continuities between “lesbian” and “queer” political goals. The Lesbian Avengers’ LACROP organizing project is but one example of how the ostensibly queer departure from lesbian essentialism in fact drew on lesbian political lessons even as queer theorists disavowed and homogenized them.

To return to the example with which I opened this chapter, then, how might seeing lesbianism relationally help us to make sense of an event like the London Pride parade, in which the ongoing antagonism between ‘lesbians’ and ‘queers’ appears like some kind of war between right and wrong ways of thinking politically? First, thinking of lesbianism on relational terms should alter the ways that we perceive these groups themselves. As Young would point out, no group is “essentialist” *in reality*, precisely because relations of authority and subordination, of privilege and marginality, exist in all groups. We should be skeptical, then, of any symbolic political scene that asks us to judge whether we are “for” or “against” an essentialist vision of the world, and we should be equally skeptical of the notion that the solution to inequalities is a more sophisticated methodological frame that “accounts for” difference. What is needed, I would argue, is neither a more charitable reading of the TERFs in the name of “hearing both sides,” nor is it an out-of-hand rejection of “lesbianism” as a potential site of coalitional struggle. Rather than simply cancel TERFs out of an abstract commitment to “difference,” then,

lesbian feminists of the 1980s would offer a more robust critique of the London protesters and a coalitional path forward, if feminists and queers are willing to take it. If any group is making a claim of moral vulnerability and a demand for repair, it is the trans* activists who, like lesbians of color in the 1980s, articulate a kind of breach of the promise of reciprocity that a feminist or queer counterpublic promises. And it is the TERFs who, in the name of an egregiously inaccurate version of the history of lesbian feminism, have attempted to “Get the L Out,” thereby refusing engagement, reciprocal or otherwise, with trans* people. Such a situation need not be a matter of giving up on the LGBTQ coalition altogether; rather, like the negotiations over race that I describe above, it ought to be seen as an invitation into an open-ended process of accounting and repairing that is the real end of coalition-building.

Second, just as defining the unequal relationships *within* the lesbian feminist community as instances of moral vulnerability recasts the harms suffered by lesbians of color as breeches of accountability rather than exclusions, viewing this community in relational terms also transfigures our understanding of the ways in which lesbians sought to approach redress. This is an important lesson for both feminist and queer politics today, because understanding relationality as the central political lesson of lesbianism must necessarily alter how we approach difficult questions of inclusion and difference in groups like the “LGBTQ movement.” While it is tempting to cast one’s politics in the terms of moral authority – of “correct” articulations of solidarity and progressivism – a relational view will necessarily, and, I think, productively, trouble this impulse. *Relations* and *hierarchies* are not things anyone concerned with social justice can be “for” or “against;” rather, we can only ask how, and how well, people imbricated in these

hierarchies respond to them, whether they are able to name them, to accept responsibility for them, and to work together to repair them.

These lessons, however, have largely been forgotten in an era in which complex, highly abstract theories about constitutive “difference” and “exclusion” have made it clear that it is politically naïve, at best, and simply incorrect, at worse, to think or act in from a political commitment to reciprocal accountability. Such aims, we are told, betray our perverse desire for policing identity, for “wounded attachments,” for “constitutive exclusions.” However, as the relational account I have reconstructed here indicates, practice of reciprocal accountability are in fact well-equipped to help us build more robust solidarities with one another without effacing the real conditions of inequality in which these relations will be built. More than this, though, it points to a more fundamental political reality: that the conditions of inequality that make the harms of moral vulnerability possible will not disappear because we have a “more thorough” conceptual apparatus for understanding how differences inhere in categories. Instead, we must take these relationships as a condition *for* – and an invitation *into* – relational practices of accountability.

Chapter 4

Lesbian Existence:

Seeing from the ‘Oppressed Point of View’

Besides, domination is denied; there is no slavery of women, there is difference. To which I will answer with this statement made by a Rumanian peasant at a public meeting in 1848: ‘Why do the gentlemen say it was not slavery, for we know it to have been slavery, this sorrow that we have sorrowed.’ Yes, we know it, and this science of oppression cannot be taken away from us.

- Monique Wittig⁴¹³

Introduction

At the beginning of this dissertation, I suggested that reconstructing lesbian feminism during the 1980s as a distinct form of publicity can teach feminist academics important lessons about what it would take to build more intersectional coalitions in the present. Throughout this work, I have argued that in order to recognize these resources, we must stop thinking in terms of “third wave” assumptions about this period. Such a move would include displacing narratives about lesbian feminists’ identitarian, exclusionary, and essentialist commitments. Instead, I have maintained that we approach lesbian feminism by thinking intersectionally – that is, by asking ourselves: Who do we imagine as our audience when we speak? To whom are our theories and political frameworks accountable? Intersectionality, that is, requires that we remind ourselves that making space for marginalized voices isn’t just about getting coalition *right*, but is about committing to repairing the trust that hierarchies and asymmetries jeopardize.

⁴¹³ Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 31.

In the preceding chapters, then, I argued that lesbian feminism, far from occupying the essentialist, reactionary, and exclusionary identity politics that “third wave” historicizations have imposed on it, was in fact an open-ended, process-oriented, and deeply coalitional project. Further, although I’ve been arguing that lesbian feminism was an effort to build a *public*, the goal was not to reproduce just any kind of public; it was to be something radically new – a public organized around the principle of *listening* and *accounting*, of *repairing* and *working through*. In the chapter that follows, then, I will turn more explicitly to a concept that has constantly vexed contemporary scholars about lesbian feminists’ appeals to these political activities: the category of ‘experience.’ On the face of it, the appeal to listening, accounting, and repairing made by lesbian feminists seems to rest explicitly and more than a little problematically on the uneasy terrain of ‘experience.’ Because the activities of listening, accounting, and repairing have to do with accepting the inherent validity of the claims made by the marginalized, and with allowing such claims to transform the way we assess and articulate political claims in the first place, they seem to many to recall a set of largely discredited debates over what is now called “feminist standpoint theory.” Standpoint theories, as Nancy Hartsock put it in one of her early essays on the subject, *at best* “leads us to respect experience and differences, to respect people enough to believe that they are in the best possible position to make their own revolution.”⁴¹⁴ At worst, however, critics of standpoint theory have argued that the uncritical relationship between lived experiences, standpoints, and radical politics that these theories portray risks reproducing the very categories that oppress

⁴¹⁴ Nancy Hartsock, “Fundamental Feminism: Prospect and Perspective,” *Building Feminist Theory*, ed. Charlotte Bunch (New York: Longman, 1981); 40.

women and dangerously restricting the spectrum of what “counts” as women’s experiences *as women*.⁴¹⁵

Indeed, as critiques of feminist standpoint theory gained steam in the academy, it was lesbian feminists’ apparent overreliance on experience – along with the related charges of essentialism and exclusion – that fueled “third wave” rejections of lesbian feminism.⁴¹⁶ In this chapter, however, I argue not only that lesbian feminists understood the distinctive challenges of experience as a political concept, but also that they actively sought to establish their intersectional and coalitional politics on a different terrain. Rather than establishing experience as a radical form of feminist epistemology, as theorists like Hartsock did, or resignifying experiences by developing theories of performativity and embodiment as queer theorists would later advocate, lesbian feminists grappled with the political challenges of experience by relentlessly interrogating the ways that certain experiences are systematically foreclosed *as* political matters – in short, of the danger of mistaking a certain perspective for the interests and desires of *the* public that I outlined in Chapter 2.

I make this case by turning to a surprising figure in lesbian feminism during this period: Monique Wittig. Indeed, Wittig cuts an imposing figure in the history that I am telling in this work, not least because she has been claimed as a sort of untimely

⁴¹⁵ Joan Scott’s now-classic critique of experience, for example, emphasizes how experience has become something of a “foundation” for ostensibly non-foundationalist historians. I return to Scott’s argument about experience below. “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797.

⁴¹⁶ Biddy Martin’s critique of “coming out” narratives from Chapter 3, for example, relies on just such a rejection of experience. “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993); 274-293.

predecessor to queer theory's rejection of essentialism and overreliance on lived experience altogether. In particular, Wittig's understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality as products of the material relationship between language and social hierarchy is lauded by queer theorists for having displaced the intractable debates over "experience" that had plagued feminist assessments of standpoint. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5, even as Wittig's political thinking has been taken up by a wide range of queer theorists to substantiate their claims to anti-essentialism, many queer theorists have simultaneously gone to great lengths to distinguish themselves from Wittig as a *lesbian* theorist. Diane Crowder, for example, has traced the shape of Wittig's strange shadow on feminist and queer theory by arguing that, on the one hand, it is widely accepted among queer theorists that "Wittig was at least fifteen years ahead of what would become queer theory" – that, in rejecting the gender binary as a political given and thereby displacing the stale debates over "standpoint," she is a kind of "prophet."⁴¹⁷ At the same time, Crowder argues, because Wittig cannot be easily excised from her lesbian feminist context, queer theorists have nonetheless worked to distance themselves from her in dubious ways: "[In] order to differentiate themselves from Wittig and others who had already elaborated a radically anti-essentialist theory of sex, gender, and sexuality," Crowder provocatively suggests,

⁴¹⁷ Diane Griffin Crowder, "From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory: Implications for Political Movement," *GLQ* 13 no. 4 (2007): 490. Indeed, as Crowder notes, many early influential queer theorists cited Wittig as inspiration, if not ally. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti in Feminist Theory," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990): 255-270.

“some representatives of queer theory felt obliged to denounce Wittig’s redefinition of lesbianism as itself essentialist.” She continues,

But a closer look at what Wittig has written shows that her ‘definition’ of the lesbian bears no substantive resemblance to the creature posited by certain critics who see it as “naively” conceived or as a “third gender” that somehow miraculously escapes the reality of obligatory heterosexuality. That so many female queer theorists impugn this one idea suggests, for me, a rift between their acceptance of many of Wittig’s ideas and their rejection, or misunderstanding, of the materialist foundation upon which those ideas rest.⁴¹⁸

Following Crowder, I want to suggest that queer theorists’ positioning of Wittig as a kind of untimely precursor to queer theory – as a prophet rather than a political thinker in her own right – radically dislocates her from the 1980s, from the materialist feminism she produced, and from the scene of *lesbian* feminism altogether. As I have argued throughout this work, such moves to memorialize lesbian feminist thinkers as prophets even as they are dislocated from their political context is not only historically suspect, but also evacuates the political resources of lesbian feminism from the present.

If Wittig displaced the debate over “standpoint” that had grown stale by the mid-1980s, then, I will argue that it is not because she was a queer prophet heralding a turn away from experience and towards a politics of resignification. Nor, I will argue, was this displacement the result of her rejection of the tenets of lesbian feminism during the 1980s more generally. Instead, I will argue that Wittig drew upon the activities of publicity that were central to lesbian feminism – listening, accounting, and repairing – to theorize more explicitly the risks of mistaking one’s marginality as an exemplary political stance. I will argue, following Wittig, that it is true that an attention to lived experience and standpoint alone will not suffice for an intersectional and coalitional feminist politics. But I will also

⁴¹⁸ Crowder, “From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory,” 490-491.

argue that Wittig, like many of her lesbian feminist contemporaries, understood this. In fact, Wittig reminds us that lived experiences carry political weight not because they represent a kind of irrefutable evidence, or because they reveal something fundamentally distinctive about a feminist standpoint – or *queer exemplarity* – within gendered hierarchies. Rather, they matter politically because they remind us of the extent to which demands for accountability are so often reduced to bland claims about difference; because they testify to the extent to which we, because shaped by these reductions, are willing to accept the rules of the game; because they point to the difficulty of creating institutional and political change armed with ‘mere’ experiences. They might point us, as Sara Ahmed has suggested they should, to the ways that efforts to expose experiences of abuse can paradoxically breed silence.⁴¹⁹ They might alert us, in short, to what I call in this chapter the systemic political constraints on the *existence* of certain kinds of political experiences and subjects. Wittig reminds us, then, that the coalitional practices that I have argued throughout this dissertation were central to lesbian feminism during the 1980s – the practices of listening, accounting, repair – are not epistemological problems, as they are often depicted, but *political ones*.

Confronting these problems in politically effective ways, I argue in this chapter, cannot be accomplished through attention to experience alone. But neither will it be accomplished by *critiquing* experience and turning, as the theorists in Chapter 1 did, to a more exemplary methodological approach. Instead, I suggest here that Wittig’s work

⁴¹⁹ Ahmed, who has resigned from her post at Goldsmiths University, has recently begun independently writing on institutional abuse in the academy “in dedication to those who have experiences they would complain about but cannot complain *because* of their experiences.” See “Complaint as Diversity Work,” *Feminist Killjoys*; 11/10/17. <https://feministkilljoys.com/>

distills and illuminates what is compelling about the *particular* way that lesbian theorists grappled with this challenge of coalition-building through the practices of listening, accounting, and repairing. I do so in three parts. First, I lay out a decades-old debate between standpoint theorists and their “third wave” critics, paying special attention to the role of the category “experience” in both. While standpoint theorists argue that the lived experience of marginality can be transformed into a political consciousness that incites radical, structural change, critics of this view argue instead that standpoint theorists fail to interrogate *how* lived experiences are constructed, maintained, and co-opted in power, thereby forfeiting any radical change marginal figures might hope to effect. Instead of naively reproducing the very concepts and categories that bind them, then, these theorists advocate for a politics of resignification, in which hierarchies are not erased, but are rather “re-membered.”⁴²⁰

Wittig, by contrast, revises the framework of *existence* developed in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* to describe a distinctive operation of power which exceeds both standpoint theorists’ and Delphy’s formulations. Like Beauvoir, Wittig insists that seeing power from the “oppressed point of view” reveals a unique dimension of power: under oppressive conditions, politicizing lived experiences tends not to enable self-constitution but to reify oppressive relations by reducing certain subjects’ political claims to claims about inclusion into a collective standpoint, on the one hand, or exemplary difference, on the other. In effect, this dimension of power describes the perennial challenge of publicity that I outlined in Chapter 2; namely, the risk of mistaking a particular point of view for

⁴²⁰ Denise Riley uses the term “re-membering” to denote a “new” feminist theory that emerged from the work, among others, of French feminists in general, and Julia Kristeva in particular. I will return to Riley’s conception of re-membering below.

the interests of “the” public. Working against this tendency, Wittig argues that the persistent reduction of lesbian existence to matters of inclusion or difference should not prompt theorists and political actors to merely interrogate lesbians’ marginal position, but should cause them to demand accountability for their marginal position and repair of their reduced subjectivities. Sustained attention to lesbian existence, she argues, can therefore help lesbian feminists learn to divest from this operation of power.

Working against the tendency to displace Wittig and her ideas from the context of lesbian feminism and to read her, instead, as an untimely precursor to queer theory, in Part II I situate Wittig’s argument about lesbian existence within the political context of the French feminist Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) in particular, and in the context of lesbian feminism more broadly. Considered in these contexts, Wittig’s attention to lesbian existence was born out of a set of concrete political evaluations that bear striking similarities to the ones I argued were hashed out in the American context. In particular, Wittig’s experiences in the MLF reveal the degree to which the challenges of publicity that I have outlined are problems of coalitions, broadly speaking, rather than problems specific to the individuals and groups that made up lesbian feminism in the U.S. More than that, though, locating Wittig in her historical and political context also reveal how her engagement in lesbian organizing *allowed* her to theorize the challenges of publicity as well as the coalitional resources she thought were lesbian feminists’ best options. Finally, I open up the question of what Wittig’s emphasis on lesbian existence teaches us in terms of resisting the persistent challenges of publicity that lesbian feminism identified. If attention to lesbian existence helped Wittig notice that power functions by reducing the terms on which one can exist politically, I argue, then the

lesbian feminist conception of coalition as a process in which listening, accounting, and repairing suddenly appear all the more appealing.

Problems of ‘Experience’

The feminist turn to individual experiences as a mode of analysis can hardly be understated. Indeed, not only was it the pillar on which key tenets like “the personal is political” were built, but the emphasis on lived experience also lies at the heart of feminism’s revolutionary ambitions.⁴²¹ As a NOW consciousness-raising manual from 1982 put it, revealing personal experiences of sexist oppression are “the key to taking action.” Thought in this light, experience is precisely that which fuels the very revolutionary consciousness that a revolutionary counterpublic requires: “The anger, pain, and frustration of being a woman,” the manual continues, for example, “must be seen as a common experience, an experience which can be transformed into action, action which produces change, change which gives hope.”⁴²² Indeed, if the goal of consciousness-raising was to transform lived experiences into feminist consciousness and consciousness into action, feminist theorists supposed, then this process of moving

⁴²¹ In her landmark essay “The Personal is Political,” for example, Carol Hanisch argues that redefining what is considered “personal” is, in fact, a revolutionary activity. Referring to the activity of sharing experiences during consciousness-raising, Hanisch writes that “the reason I participate in these meetings is not to solve any personal problem. One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.” Later, she goes on to argue that accounting for as many women’s experiences as possible (including “apolitical” women’s) is necessary “not so we can do a better job of organizing them but because together we *are* a mass movement.” *Notes from the Second Year: Writings of the Radical Feminists* (1970), 76-77.

⁴²² National Organization for Women, *NOW Guidelines for Feminist Consciousness-Raising* (Washington, D.C.: NOW, 1982), 2.

outward from experience was to be feminism's unique contribution to the history of political thought and strategy. In *Fundamental Feminism*, for instance, Judith Grant explains that many "second wave" feminists understood the links between experience, feminist consciousness, and political action as feminism's key contribution to Left politics.⁴²³ Resisting the notion that "class consciousness" must be understood on objective terms, as Marxists and New Left theorists did, for feminists oppression came to be understood as

anything that women *experienced* as oppressive [...] The idea of experience was necessary because of the need for some kind of evidence that women were oppressed. That is, it was necessary to prove that the category Woman existed because if women did not have something in common, the full analytic value of the major foundational category of feminist theory would disappear. The idea behind experience is that it would *unite women through what it was assumed would be their common feelings about oppression*.⁴²⁴

Thus, the turn to experience, in Grant's telling, was a way of soliciting the viewpoints of a variety of women. In so doing, feminists hoped, they could build a revolutionary conception of women's oppression that accounts for their seeming differences across class, racial, and other social divisions.

⁴²³ According to Grant, "The New Left followed Marxian theory in positing objective conditions of oppression and exploitation (such as "class") that may or may not be subjectively felt or realized by the revolutionary agent. Likewise, the Black Power movement had an objective standard for oppression, i.e., skin color [...] But neither of these objectivist definitions of oppression would do for feminism." Grant argues that, in fact, because "the creators of feminist theory, many of whom were neither black nor working class, at first could discern no argument that might enable them to create a compelling testament to their own structural oppression," – and because "women were present in every oppressed *and* oppressing group" – they eventually settled on a *subjectivist* theory of oppression. Judith Grant. *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 28-29.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 30-31. Emphasis mine.

It was this intuition – that despite their differences, there was a common thread across all women’s experiences of work, family, and sex – that motivated the rise and fall of what is now known as “feminist standpoint theory.” On a basic level, feminist standpoint theorists make the case that, as Nancy C.M. Hartsock put it, sexism is a system-wide, structuring force that shapes women’s lives in a distinctive way. For Hartsock, “patriarchy,” as understood through the lens of the sexual division of labor, imposes a set of material, regular, and definable limitations on social relationships between men and women. “Female experience,” because structured and defined by these dynamics, reveals oppressive gendered dynamics in ways that men consistently fail to understand. Women’s experience, for Hartsock, thus “forms a basis on which to expose abstract masculinity as both partial and fundamentally perverse, as not only occupying only one side of the dualities it has constructed, but reversing the proper valuation of human society.”⁴²⁵ Women’s experiences, in other words, give the lie to the universalist assumptions baked into “capitalist patriarchy;” moreover, in revealing the limitations of current ways of understanding the world, the feminist standpoint not only “[reveals] the perverseness and inhumanity of human relations,” but also “forms the basis for moving beyond these relations.”⁴²⁶ Because women’s experiences give the lie to (masculine) abstract universalism, Hartsock argues,

women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogentric institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy... just as Marx’s understanding of the world from the standpoint of the

⁴²⁵ Nancy C.M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (New York: Kluewr, 1983), 299.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

proletariat enabled him to go beneath bourgeois ideology, so a feminist standpoint can allow us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more human social relations.⁴²⁷

If women's experiences thus reveal the one-sidedness of previous epistemological assumptions (including Marxism's and the New Left's), the *political* task at hand, Hartsock would go on to argue, is the paradigmatically feminist practice of consciousness-raising. While all *females* experience the constraints of work, family, embodiment, and sex, their standpoint becomes a *feminist* one when they begin to realize the latent revolutionary potential of their common condition. In a word, to occupy a feminist standpoint is, for Hartsock, to accept the task of "[exposing] and [clarifying] the theoretical bases for political alliance and solidarity" amongst all women.⁴²⁸ Because feminism begins from women's real, lived experiences as the basis of its revolutionary class consciousness, she argues, the shared "status of liminality" gives "us" (women) a revolutionary political edge.⁴²⁹

Feminist standpoint theory, in systematizing the idea that attention to lived experience is revolutionary, quickly caught fire amongst feminists in the academy. Following Hartsock, a number of prominent feminist theorists throughout the 1980s developed the notion that women's experiences constitute a special and privileged vantage point onto social relationships, hierarchies, and structures. Dorothy Smith, a sociologist, argued that the major categories of sociological inquiry reflected only the distorted vision of "abstract masculinity" and that the field would be better off if it were

⁴²⁷Ibid., 284.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 284.

⁴²⁹ Nancy C.M. Hartsock, "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," *Cultural Critique* 14 (1989-90): 28.

organized around concepts that reflected lived experiences.⁴³⁰ In the philosophy of science, Sandra Harding and Evelyn Fox Keller argued that the notion of scientific “objectivity” is strengthened, not weakened, when scientists begin by interrogating the situatedness and interestedness lived experiences rather than from specious, one-sided assumptions about human nature and social relationships.⁴³¹ The philosopher Alison Jaggar argued that analyzing women’s experiences justified not only the validity of feminist philosophy, but underpins a sea change in *all* theories of knowledge.⁴³² Even Black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks used the tools of standpoint theory to argue that marginality (especially the double marginalization of Black women) was a potential “site of resistance” in that allowed the development of alternative forms of relating.⁴³³ For all of these thinkers, beginning from experience is necessary for raising a feminist consciousness capable of revolutionizing existing social relationships.

But despite its popularity as an academic approach, problems with the feminist standpoint – that is, a privileged location from which one can disclose the *truth* about hierarchy – were apparent from the beginning. As Susan Hekman notes, for one, Hartsock’s insistence that “the ruling group’s vision is partial and perverse and that the

⁴³⁰ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

⁴³¹ Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Evelyn Fox Keller, “Feminism and Science,” *Signs* 7 no. 3 (1982); 589-602.

⁴³² Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983).

⁴³³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); bell hooks. “marginality as a site of resistance,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornell West (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 341-343.

vision of the oppressed exposes the ‘real’ relations among humans”⁴³⁴ strains deeply against the ascendant Foucaultian paradigm, popular amongst many feminist theorists by the late 1980s, in which “*all* visions are ‘partial and perverse’ in the sense that all knowledge is necessarily from some perspective.”⁴³⁵ Second, as Collins’ and hooks’ appeals to a specifically *Black* feminist standpoint make clear, “the” feminist standpoint as a way of outlining the common liminality of women was neither as universal nor as uncontested as it purported to be.⁴³⁶ For many of the writers with whom I have been engaging, this issue is the definitive question at work: Must experiences be shared amongst *all* women in order to count as the stuff of a radical feminist consciousness?⁴³⁷ Can experiences of racism or sexual ‘deviance,’⁴³⁸ for example, properly be considered

⁴³⁴ Susan Hekman, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” *Signs* 22 no. 2 (1997): 345. Hekman contends in this essay that, in fact, Hartsock’s feminist epistemology is less at odds with Foucaultian claims about knowledge than is often appreciated; however, she does acknowledge how deeply the rift between these two epistemological paradigms was felt by feminists during the 1980s.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁴³⁶ Indeed, in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), Patricia Hill Collins describes in detail the process by which dominant groups – even when they are marginalized in other contexts, such as white women – can come to “[appropriate] the language... associated with other groups’ standpoints while rejecting the actual politics associated with those standpoints,” 194. I will return to this argument below.

⁴³⁷ Hartsock, for her part, attempts to deal with this problem by arguing that “differences” between women are less ontological fact than effects of the dominant masculine epistemology. She urges feminists to dispense of the notion that there are irreducible differences between women on the grounds that it occludes the kind of systemic knowledge that is essential for revolutionary change. This argument, as we shall see, was the target of considerable anger and distrust for “third wave” feminists.

⁴³⁸ Although space does not permit it here, there is much to be sad about the role of so-called “deviant” sexualities in this debate; in particular, as Gayle Rubin lays out, were the sadomasochists who called feminists to task for having created a discourse of sexual conservatism. As Shane Phelan would later go on to note, “the issue of lesbian sadomasochism came to expose two problem areas for lesbian feminism” in particular. “The first is the problem of difference, particularly sexual difference, and the second is the question of speech... When lesbian sadomasochists began to speak... those lesbians

an aspect of women's experience *as women*?⁴³⁹ Must women put aside their differences in favor of *the* feminist standpoint in order to create radical change?

Indeed, the turn to experience to facilitate a potentially revolutionary class consciousness, however galvanizing in the short term, has long been the subject of deep reservations for many "third wave" feminist theorists. In her paradigm-shifting essay "The Evidence of Experience," for example, Joan Scott questions even the most basic assumptions of feminist standpoint theory: that lived experiences are reliable and transparent indicators of social structures, that macro-level differences between, say, women and men are more epistemically important than are racial, classed, and other differences between women themselves, and – most importantly – that rendering visible one's marginal status was enough to wholly undo the hierarchical relations that produce marginality. For Scott, the turn to experience, on the one hand, "has helped to legitimize a critique of the false claims to objectivity of traditional historical accounts" by "pointing out the shortcomings, incompleteness, and exclusiveness of mainstream history;" in particular, as in the case of feminist standpoint, it has done so by "providing documentation about women in the past that calls into question existing interpretations

who did not approve could find no room within feminism for their inclusion. Neither could they tell them not to speak without becoming the new oppressors." *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 138.

⁴³⁹ On this question, Black (and) lesbian feminists differed considerably from other standpoint theorists. Where Hartsock encouraged feminists to dispense with "differences," for example, Patricia Hill Collins instead advocates for an approach that sees how the intersections between various forms of oppression affect one's political consciousness. "Although most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression," Collins writes, "they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination." *Black Feminist Thought*, 229.

made without consideration of gender.”⁴⁴⁰ On the other hand, though, Scott maintains that approaches like standpoint theory fail to analyze “how subjects are constituted as different in the first place.”⁴⁴¹ Moreover, Scott claims that in accepting the notion that lived experiences – and individual narrations of those experiences – can accurately capture the shape and scope of hierarchies, standpoint theorists naively assume that revolutionary change is the obvious and inevitable result of truth-telling and consciousness raising. For Scott and other “third wave” critics of experience, however, standpoint theories simply leave aside questions about how *certain* differences become more relevant than others, how power sometimes incorporates and corrupts efforts at consciousness-raising, and how an uncritical reliance on lived experiences limits theorists’ ability to see past individual, voluntaristic forms of political change. In short,

the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems – those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between, say, sexual practices and social conventions, or between homosexuality and heterosexuality.⁴⁴²

In light of arguments like Scott’s,⁴⁴³ then, the questions that were raised by standpoint theorists came to be seen as limited *both* as an epistemology and as a politics.⁴⁴⁴ Thus, as

⁴⁴⁰ Joan Scott. “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 no. 4 (1991): 777.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 777.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 778.

⁴⁴³ Scott’s, of course, is not the only critique of experience emerging from the “third wave” of feminist theory. Other prominent examples include works by Donna Haraway, Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Linda Nicholson, and many others. An excellent overview of the range of these positions can be found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴⁴⁴ In a rejoinder to a spirited critique of her work by Linda Gordon, Scott wrote the following in defense of her conceptualization of the relationship between epistemology and politics: “Despite endless disagreement, some things are clear: theory is intimately related to practice, academic feminism is political, and feminists address and attempt to

Kathleen Canning has pointed out, Scott's landmark essay "constructs the task of analyzing the experience and/or identity of difference as oppositional rather than complementary to the task of examining how difference was constituted in the first place."⁴⁴⁵

Because standpoint theorists and their critics see the role of "experience" in radically different lights, their view onto the possibilities of political change are also deeply at odds. On the one hand, feminist standpoint theorists argue that feminism represents a *revolutionary* potential – that in becoming conscious of their privileged vantage point onto power, "women" might reveal the real shape and scope of oppression, thereby throwing into relief the kinds of material changes that would need to be accomplished in order to restore or remake "more human" relationships. On the other, critics of experience as a political tool broadly reject the idea that revolutionary change can be so easily accomplished. In *Am I That Name?*, for instance, Denise Riley argues that the "indeterminate" nature of women – the fact that "women's experiences" are historically constructed and ever-changing – points towards a politics of "re-membering" or resignification rather than revolution. If feminism "cannot escape the torments which spring from speaking for a collectivity," Riley argues, neither can "[these] difficulties... be assuaged by appeals to the myriad types and conditions of women on this earth."⁴⁴⁶

change the normative meanings of gender in their societies... [Feminists] challenged these normative views by critically analyzing how they operated and by offering new kinds of knowledge to correct or displace them. Their confrontations with existing power structures were necessarily and directly about epistemology and conceptualization." From "Response to Gordon," *Signs* 15 no. 4 (1990); 859.

⁴⁴⁵ Kathleen Canning, "Feminist Theory after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs* 19 no. 2 (1994): 375.

⁴⁴⁶ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 111.

Pitched between the twin dangers of collectivity and plurality (that is, the challenges of *speaking with and for others*), Riley suggests that feminists develop a new *kind* of feminism altogether; specifically, one that accepts that “there is... no fluent trajectory from feminism to a truly sexually democratic humanism; there is no easy passage from ‘women’ to ‘humanity.’”⁴⁴⁷ Riley poses this new feminism over and above “modern” (i.e. standpoint) feminism, which “in its sociological aspects is landed with the identity of women as an achieved fact of history and epistemology” and “can only swing between asserting or refusing the completeness of this given identity.”⁴⁴⁸ Instead, a new feminism would attempt to re-member, as in remake or resignify, the category in unexpected and subversive ways:

That ‘women’ is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism; which has hardly been an indiscriminate embrace anyway of the fragilities and peculiarities of the category. What [new feminisms] do demand is a willingness, at times, to shred this ‘women’ to bits – to develop a speed, foxiness, versatility. The temporalities of ‘women’ are like the missing middle term of Aristotelian logic; while it’s impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it’s also impossible never to be one. On such shifting sands feminism must stand and sway.⁴⁴⁹

Thus, by the time feminists showed ‘experience’ to be inadequate to the task of producing a revolutionary consciousness, they had already concluded that the political lessons of feminists past were so deeply flawed that their promises of radical change were foolish.

Despite being a widespread debate over the category of “experience” across disciplinary and political lines, as is true with many of the pitfalls and failures of

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 114.

“feminisms past,” the epistemological and political problems of standpoint theory enumerated by scholars like Scott and Riley have been attributed with particular gusto to *lesbian* feminism. While Hartsock and many other theorists of experience, for example, did not see themselves as lesbian feminists, the critiques levied against standpoint’s use of experience was applied in particular to the argument, attributed solely to lesbian feminists, that the “Woman-Identified-Woman” was a revolutionary agent for having dared to love women in a misogynist world. In *Identity Politics*, for example, Shane Phelan argues that one reason that feminists (even non-lesbian ones) began to search for a standpoint based in experiences at all was lesbian feminists’ insistence that they had discovered a unique and privileged position from which to critique patriarchy. Lesbian feminists, she argues, “[saw] clearly that part of the struggle must be to grasp the means of production of truth and to claim the status of truth-speakers.”⁴⁵⁰ Yet in claiming this status – and in demanding that *all* women must occupy such a position – lesbian feminists led feminist theory astray:

The result...was dismaying. In constructing the new lesbian, lesbian feminists did not deal with the problem of difference. Rather, they erased it by valorizing and moralizing lesbian sex... Any sense of the plurality of lesbian lives was lost in the construction of “the” lesbian – the unified, epistemological and volitional agent.⁴⁵¹

Like Scott and Riley, Phelan argues here that in seeking to develop a conception of lesbianism that privileges lesbians’ macro-level structural position vis a vis straight society over intra-group differences, they inadvertently reproduced the very patterns of thinking that have long structured traditional political theory; “that same nature,” she

⁴⁵⁰ Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 137.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

writes, “ensured that the response would be made in another normalizing depth-language as insidious as the one they had fought to escape.”⁴⁵² Thus,

The political lesson we may learn from [lesbian feminism], then, is that the real danger facing us is not one of doctrine nor of behavior, but more fundamentally of the impulse to totalization, to power/knowledge, that is endemic to modernity [...] What we are witnessing in lesbian feminism is a new Enlightenment, another attempt to make words mean what we want them to mean and to shed the confusion and evil of the past.⁴⁵³

For Phelan, as for other critics of standpoint theories, lesbian feminism’s uncritical reliance on lived experience *represents* and *exemplifies* the broader tendency in feminist theory to reproduce, rather than radically alter or even resignify, traditional structures of subordination.

Finally, if lesbian feminism has come to represent the lure of relying on lived experience to claim revolutionary potential, I would like to suggest that no lesbian feminist has been more messily entangled in this narrative than Monique Wittig. As I suggested above, Wittig is often heralded as a kind of “prophet” who signals the turn towards resignificatory theory, even as she is herself dismissed for having failed to adequately grasp the limitations of a revolutionary theory built on the premise of lived experience. Let me use just one example of the fraught figure she cuts in this debate.⁴⁵⁴ In *A Lure of Knowledge*, Judith Roof situates Wittig as the crux in the debate over “the lure of consciousness and identity” as “a locus, a place from which one can begin to sort out

⁴⁵² Ibid., 138.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁵⁴ There are, of course, many other instances in which Wittig is used to “displace” a major debate such as the one over experience, only to be herself displaced. While I don’t deal with it explicitly here, for instance, many feminist historians and theorists have noticed Wittig’s peculiar positioning in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

differences and gain a political efficacious consciousness,”⁴⁵⁵ on the one hand, and the acceptance that “both origins and identity are lures, decoys that promise power, knowledge, and a challenge to a patriarchal system or a way out altogether.”⁴⁵⁶ Because she seems to show *both* that lesbians give the lie to presumptive heterosexuality *and* argue that lesbian feminists might possess a special kind of revolutionary knowledge, Roof argues, to grapple with Wittig is to grasp the stakes of the debate over experience that I outlined above. In a later essay, Roof puts the matter this way. On the one hand, Wittig’s readers

clearly position Wittig in the place of a successful challenge to identity, truth, power, and knowledge as those are constructed within a heterosexual system. Because she seems to call into question the very categories by which the lesbian can be known in the first place, Wittig’s work seems to create a kind of lesbian postmodern in the field of lesbian writing characterized by a primary gender struggle.⁴⁵⁷

At the same time as she appears to reject the “fluent trajectory” from ‘women’ to ‘human’ that standpoint theories suppose, however, Roof argues that Wittig’s writing nonetheless fails to escape fully from its dependence on *experience* as a category of analysis:

Wittig’s deft transition from materiality to a categorical confrontation with gender skips over one of her problematic underlying assumptions: that language can transparently represent experience and can thus directly transform ideology.... This utopian gap in Wittig’s otherwise perceptive critique of the ideology of gender exposes her very traditional reliance on the originary existence of a subject outside of ideology.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 166.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁴⁵⁷ Judith Roof, “Lesbians and Lyotard: Legitimation and the Politics of the Name,” *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 55.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

Thus, “though Wittig’s writing *looks* postmodern,” Roof claims that its “covert reliance” upon categories such as experience disqualifies it for entry into the “new” resignificatory feminism that emerged from these debates.⁴⁵⁹ Such a feminism – one that moves *beyond* the failures of lesbian feminism – would have come to terms with the “sustained tension of an undefined and unlocated term” like lesbian; it would “[reiterate] a cultural paradigm, but as one that plays within and beyond such paradigms – there and not there, not working as a name but as a suggestion.”⁴⁶⁰

Thus, although the debate over standpoint and its use of the concept experience took place nearly three decades ago, it has made an outsized impact on contemporary theorists’ frameworks for interpreting lesbian feminism such as Wittig’s during the 1980s. In fact, worries about standpoint theorists’ tendency to shift easily between lived experiences, structural positions, and political change encouraged many contemporary theorists to reject all theorists, like Wittig, whose writings appear to echo standpoint theory’s revolutionary politics.

Existence Beyond Experience: Power and the Straight Mind

Despite the fact that Wittig’s thought is often conflated with a lesbian “standpoint,” then, I would like to suggest that her work takes a distinctive approach that pushes apart and remakes the relationships between lived experiences, social structures, and political strategy that feminist standpoint theories thread together. At the same time, however, I am not petitioning for Wittig’s inclusion in the resignificatory “new

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

feminism” advocated by Scott, Riley, Phelan, Roof, and others. Instead, I want to insist on Wittig’s proximity to the issues of lesbian feminist publicity that I have been tracing throughout this work; namely to transformative practices of listening, accounting, and working through. This politics, I will suggest, is distinct from that of *both* standpoint theorists and their critics: it both outlines the limitations of experience for a revolutionary politics *and* refuses to cede revolutionary change to a politics of partial resignification.

Although I will argue that the political intuition at work in Wittig’s writing emerges from the specific context of lesbian feminism, the critical vocabulary that distinguishes Wittig from standpoint theorists is rooted in the framework of Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*. Though Wittig departs from Beauvoir’s phenomenological framework and her emphasis on existentialist ethics, her description of the constraints of oppression is much closer to Beauvoir’s than it is to standpoint theorists like Hartsock’s. Recall that Hartsock views hierarchy as emerging from the “partial and perverse” nature of men’s point of view. On this view, it is the arbitrariness of hierarchy – its distortion of “real” human relationships – that reveals the injustice of oppression. Beauvoir, on the other hand, describes oppression as a state in which one’s ability to accomplish oneself – the possibility of *Being*, of existing – is thwarted by some outside force:

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by a perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into ‘in-itself,’ of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier. (New York: Vintage, 2011), 16.

In the context of Beauvoir's thought, one's existence is dependent on one's freedom – in other words, on the ability to choose transcendence for oneself, on the capacity to exist and to be recognized as a subject. Put the other way around, then, oppression is a state in which one's very existence is rendered impossible. Thus, for Beauvoir, it is not the partial or situated nature of an abstract, masculine point of view *per se* that makes sexist oppression so unjust, but the fact that it renders the *existence* of certain subjects systematically impossible by distorting and invalidating their points of view.

Further, according to Beauvoir, the 'feminine condition' is a special kind of existential constraint. Like other oppressed subjects, women function as 'Other,' meaning that although they are a crucial part of the social fabric in which men achieve their own existence, they are not treated as subjects deserving of recognition and reciprocity. In this regard, the situation of women is akin to all dominated groups. To Beauvoir, however, the fact of women's 'Otherness' alone does not explain the "unique problem" of femininity. Indeed, unlike other oppressed groups – here, Beauvoir distinguishes women from Jews, Black people, Indigenous people, 'foreigners,' and the proletariat – women "do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects."⁴⁶² Why this peculiar lack of political subjectivity? Why, for instance, have women not achieved the kinds of revolutionary political consciousness for which standpoint theorists, like other feminists, call? Beauvoir argues that the answer lies in women's own complicity in their immanence. If women are denied the capacity to posit themselves as subjects, Beauvoir argues, it is only partially because that fate is violently imposed on them: indeed, the particular injustice of

⁴⁶² Ibid., 8.

women's oppression is that it operates by compelling them to *choose* their own oppression.

Framed against that question – what are the conditions that make complicity in one's own oppression possible? – *The Second Sex* takes as its object not the 'stuff' of hierarchy itself, but rather the bait and switch of oppressive logics. In contrast to standpoint theorists, whose framework demands that the oppressed transform their everyday experiences into revolutionary consciousness, Beauvoir argues that expecting such non-existent subjects to grasp this potential is both unrealistic and, more importantly, obscures the 'trap' of femininity. The task of feminism, then, is to reveal how this trap operates and to mark out the challenges of accomplishing radical consciousness. To Beauvoir, fulfilling this task entails two key recognitions. On the one hand, *experience itself* has a profound chilling effects on the female subject insofar as her social experience demands that she "renounce her autonomy" in order to please others.⁴⁶³ On the other hand, the fact that existence is definitionally masculine makes it possible for women to accept, believe, and even treasure this constraint.⁴⁶⁴ Ultimately, argues Beauvoir, the drama between existence and experience thus functions as a kind of bait

⁴⁶³ [F]or the woman there is, from the start, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her 'being-other; she is taught that to please, she must try to please, must make herself object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a living doll, and freedom is denied her; thus a vicious circle is closed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, grasp, and discover the world around her, the less she will find its resources, and the less she will dare to affirm herself as subject..." 295.

⁴⁶⁴ "The fundamental reason for this defeatism is that the adolescent girl does not consider herself responsible for her future; she judges it useless to demand much of herself since her lot in the end will not depend on her. Far from destining herself to man because she thinks she is inferior to him, it is because she is destined for him that, in accepting the idea of her inferiority, she constitutes it... In fact, she will gain value in the eyes of males not by increasing her human worth but by modeling herself on their dreams," 347.

and switch: through their very experiences, subjects in the “feminine condition” are compelled to *make themselves* ‘Other,’ only to find that by doing so they are locked out of subjective existence. On this view, the epistemic and political transformations that a feminist standpoint is meant to effect will be thwarted until women can, collectively, divest from this trap.

The oppressive logic of femininity, the “you-will-or-you-will-not-be” interdiction through which the thought of domination operates, is precisely the framework Wittig later picked up to describe the unique political paradox in which lesbian feminists find themselves: the Straight Mind. Here, for instance, is Beauvoir’s summation of women’s political and critical limitations under patriarchy:

It is understandable why, from this perspective, woman objects to masculine logic. Not only does it have no bearing on her experience, but she also knows that in men’s hands reason becomes an insidious form of violence; their peremptory affirmations are intended to mystify her. They want to confine her in a dilemma: either you agree or you don’t; she has to agree in the name of the whole system of accepted principles: in refusing to agree, she rejects the whole system; she cannot allow herself such a dramatic move; she does not have the means to create another society; yet she does not agree with this one. *Halfway between revolt and slavery, she unwillingly resigns herself to masculine authority.*⁴⁶⁵

Because a woman’s actual experiences contradict the terms of existence as defined from the masculine point of view, she can neither constitute herself as a subject nor divest herself from the structures that prevent her existence. From the ‘point of view of the oppressed,’ then, the call for self-constitution – that is, the demand for “consciousness raising” – is all-too-often a function of the very power that prevents it. Wittig, following Beauvoir, similarly argues that the obligation to use the category of one’s domination in one’s political struggle against it – to claim ‘women’ as a radical political actor against a

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 651. Emphasis mine.

patriarchy which creates the category, for example – is a constitutive feature of the straight mind. “The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men,” Wittig writes, “are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality... These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms.”⁴⁶⁶ We must notice, Wittig insists, that what the *experience* of powerlessness actually demonstrates is the impossibility of articulating one’s historical and political existence – to constitute oneself as the subject of one’s own struggle.

In her adoption of the category “existence” from Beauvoir’s work, then, Wittig distinguishes herself dramatically from the framework of standpoint theory. Where standpoint theorists argue that women’s experiences of oppression become the grounds on which they develop a revolutionary consciousness, Wittig argues that these same experiences are actually a kind of bait and switch. Oppression is not simply a lack of revolutionary consciousness; for Wittig, it is a kind of bait and switch that compels women to *become* ‘Other,’ only to learn that this otherness restricts them from claiming to be subjects of their own struggle. In other words, it is the experience of being a woman *itself* that “prevent[s] us from speaking unless we speak in their terms.” Moreover, Wittig argues, while this bait and switch – the temptation to found one’s politics on the basis of an oppressive category like “women” – effects all women, it especially constrains lesbians, who can neither claim to be “real” women nor articulate their lived experiences on the terms of traditional forms of women’s work (e.g. motherhood) and sexuality (in

⁴⁶⁶ Monique Wittig, ‘The Straight Mind,’ in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 25.

relation to men). Far from Hartsock's notion that a feminist standpoint is the key for raising a revolutionary women's consciousness, then, Wittig argues quite the opposite. "In order to become a class," Wittig writes, "we first have to kill the myth of 'woman' including its most seductive aspects:"⁴⁶⁷ if standpoint considers "woman" to be a standpoint for a revolutionary consciousness, it has failed to do so.

However, if Wittig rejects the assumption that "women" can easily or inevitably come to a revolutionary consciousness, neither does she accept that feminists must cede revolutionary politics in favor of a resignificatory framework. Unlike Riley, for instance, Wittig refuses to concede that the seeming impossibility of constituting the revolutionary agent "women" is a constitutive limitation of collective agency. Doing so, she argues, would be to "naturalize history," that is, to "naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible."⁴⁶⁸ Instead, she insists that what Riley interprets as a natural "impossibility" is, in fact, a *political constraint* produced in and through power. One of Wittig's most controversial claims, for example, is that the word "woman" itself is less a historically indeterminate category than an "irredeemable" political abuse. For her, the usage of the category woman in itself – even when feminists attempt to resignify it – constitutes evidence of what she calls the 'thought of domination.' In 'One is Not Born a Woman,' Wittig glosses the issue this way:

I am sure that an economic and political transformation will not dedramatize these categories of language. Can we redeem *slave*? Can we redeem *n****r, negress*? How is *woman* different? Will we continue to write *white, master, man*? The transformation of economic relationships will not suffice. We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are

⁴⁶⁷ Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," 16.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

strategic for us...And we cannot leave this within the power of the straight mind or the thought of domination.”⁴⁶⁹

Like the racial categories she cites, Wittig rejects the idea that “woman” can be resignified, re-membered, or rearticulated in even partially liberatory ways; such a move, she argues, would abandon the task of “[producing] a political transformation of the key concepts” and would leave feminist politics “within the power of the straight mind or the thought of domination.”

Like revolutionary consciousness-raising, Wittig argues that the project of resignification in fact cedes the real political goal: demanding *existence* as the subject of one’s own history. She underlines this point in ‘Homo Sum:’

There is no need when coming under the parameters of the oppressed to follow the Marxian design and to wait until the ‘final victory’ to declare that the oppressed are human as well as the dominators, that women are human as well as men. Where is the obligation for us to go on bearing with a series of ontological, epistemological, and linguistic *enterloupettes*, under the pretext that we do not have the power. It is a part of our fight to unmask them, to say that one out of two men is a woman, that the universal belongs to us although we have been robbed and despoiled at this level as well as at the political and economic ones.⁴⁷⁰

Wittig here includes such figural representations as Marx’s proletariat and feminism’s ‘women’ under the same umbrella; both, she suggests, remain under the thrall of Difference by mistakenly presuming that *identifying* one’s experience of oppression – that is, consciousness raising – is the key to accomplishing political change. At the same time, however, in this passage she argues that ceding radical change in favor of a politics of resignification would demand that the oppressed “go on bearing... under the pretext that we do not have the power.” All such a politics would do, she argues, is “lead us back

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁷⁰ Wittig, ‘Homo Sum,’ 55-56.

to the myth of woman which created by men especially for us, and with it we sink back into a natural group.”⁴⁷¹

Like Beauvoir, then, Wittig calls for a turn to the “point of view of the oppressed” in order to reveal the bait and switch of oppression and, more importantly, to outline the possibilities for thinking outside of it: “When we discover that women are the objects of oppression and appropriation,” she writes, the discovery does not *only* entail “a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with *new concepts*, from the point of view of oppression.”⁴⁷² For Wittig, the point of view that most fully exposes the logic of oppression for what it is – a bait and switch tactic designed to enclose women within their own experiences – is the point of view of the lesbian. Whereas ‘women’ are too easily conflated with the concepts that sustain the straight mind, Wittig maintains the very existence of lesbians in society “pragmatically reveals” that the barrier to subjective existence is political. Lesbians, like other women, are barred from existence and are ensnared in the bait and switch of the straight mind. Unlike ‘women’ as a class, however, Wittig argues that lesbians are uniquely situated in relation to the straight mind’s categories impose on women – they can *remember* being compelled to ‘become women.’ “Lesbians should always remember and acknowledge,” she writes, “how ‘unnatural,’ compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being ‘woman’ was for us in the old days before the women’s liberation movement.”⁴⁷³ She continues,

It was a political constraint, and those who resisted it were accused of not being ‘real’ women. But then we were proud of it, since in the accusation there was

⁴⁷¹ Wittig, ‘One is Not Born a Woman,’ 13.

⁴⁷² ‘One is Not Born a Woman,’ 18.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.

already something like a shadow of victory: the avowal by the oppressor that ‘woman’ is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a ‘real’ one.⁴⁷⁴

The lesbian, because she is at once denied existence as a subject on the basis of her femininity *and* derided for failing to be “really” feminine, thus reveals the logic of the straight mind: not just a partial, perverse viewpoint, the straight mind is instead an insidious form of power that entices and then constrains, lures and then denies.

This may seem – as it has seemed to many “third wave” theorists – like a standpoint from which to reveal the path to revolutionary consciousness. However, for Wittig, despite the “shadow of victory” that lesbians experienced by showing that ‘woman’ “is not something that goes without saying,” even this acknowledgement could not break the spell of the straight mind. A lesbian may refuse to “become” a woman, for instance, but she will nonetheless fail to assume the point of view of existence – that is, the point of view of a *full subject*. Like Beauvoir’s argument that femininity is but the state of existing “halfway between revolt and slavery,” the lesbian’s experience most clearly demonstrates how the category ‘women’ lures individual subjects to become complicit in their own oppression. Because the straight mind compels them to articulate their oppression in foreign terms (that is, on the terms of “men” and “women”), the lesbian’s point of view, like Beauvoir’s female subjects, reveals that the oppressed can exist only in *oblique* relation to subjectivity. “Thus a lesbian,” she insists, “*has* to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society.”⁴⁷⁵ In other words, a lesbian is what shows not only the

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

constructedness of ‘woman,’ but reveals its function as an operation of domination as well.

In Wittig’s hands, I want to suggest, an emphasis on the impossibility of lesbian *existence* under the straight mind complicates and extends the political tasks of feminism well beyond the questions posed by the debate over experience. From the point of view of existence, the question of political change ceases to be about whether theorists ought to accept or critique the epistemological ground of experience, and it dismisses the notion that feminists should occupy themselves with choosing between a politics of revolution or resignification. Instead, the task of feminism from Wittig’s perspective is to show that while the very point of view from which we consider oppressive conditions serves to reinforce the categories that sustain them, these points of view *can also* ensnare us in their compulsory logic. That the economic, social, and political limitations of women constitute *more than* just a set of common experiences – that they instead constitute a constraint on women’s very existence – is thus a political problem for feminist theory on a much broader scale than standpoint theorists and their critics have allowed. “Seeing from the oppressed point of view” – the point of view of the lesbian – is, for Wittig, a different task altogether. It is an invitation to think “beyond the categories of sex (woman and man)” by recognizing that “the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.”⁴⁷⁶

Wittig does not answer directly or programmatically what sort of political consciousness will emerge from such a perspective, but she does suggest that it will have to answer to the very questions that I have raised throughout this work as the central

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 20.

questions of *publicity*: what are the terms on which a radical counterpublic should divest or separate from mainstream society? How will the new public ensure that it remains responsible to each member of its audience, and how will it hold accountable those who fail to do so? How might a radical counterpublic best manage the tension between collective action and difference? “[Once] we have shown that all so-called personal problems are in fact class problems,” as Wittig puts it, a politics premised on the lesbian point of view “will still be left with the question of the subject of each singular woman – not the myth, but each one of us.”⁴⁷⁷ The question of what accomplishing full subjectivity for all women would look like, Wittig suggests, is an open one. But it is also “what lesbians say everywhere in this country and in some others, if not with theories at least through their social practice, whose repercussions upon straight culture and society are still unenvisionable.”⁴⁷⁸

Lesbian Existence in Circulation

Despite the importance of highlighting the conceptual architecture through which Wittig developed her critical stance, however, the point of developing this critical stance for Wittig was not to claim a philosophical tradition. Indeed, Wittig is notorious for declining to situate her work in *The Straight Mind* within any critical tradition other than that of her compatriots in the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF). Having taken part in the MLF’s inaugural demonstration⁴⁷⁹ as well as most of its subsequent

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷⁸ Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” 32.

⁴⁷⁹ The inaugural demonstration of the MLF, in which Wittig took part, was a march to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, at which she carried a sign that read: “There is one who is even more unknown than the Soldier: his wife.”

actions and controversies, Wittig was adamant that it was the experience of having stepped “out of the tracks of politics, philosophy, anthropology, history, “cultures,” to understand what is really happening”⁴⁸⁰ that had the greatest impact on her critical development. The task of reconstructing Wittig’s critical politics is thus, by design, inseparable from the task of situating her thought in its historical and political context.

In this section, then, I put Wittig’s theoretical framework in conversation with the political ‘scenes’ in which she hoped to intervene. These scenes, of course, take place in the political context of the MLF itself, in which Wittig was an early and integral member. The MLF emerged out of the broader context of May ’68, which is often credited with having shifted the character of French leftist politics away from reformist, institutional struggles to a more diffuse, participatory structure.⁴⁸¹ Distinguishing its political character from that of the centralized politics of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the French educational system, the May movement heralded a moment of democratic decentralization and – importantly – offered an inroad for groups like women who had been excluded from participation in more formal political structures.⁴⁸²

But for feminists in France – as in the US contexts that populated the last several chapters – these democratic inroads were not without their tensions. In a series of personal reflections on the relationship between May ’68 and the MLF, for instance, Wittig cites the “motley” character of the early MLF. During this early stage, Wittig notes, women affiliated with different approaches to women’s liberation led “provisional

⁴⁸⁰ Wittig, ‘Preface’ *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, xiii.

⁴⁸¹ See, for example, Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. (Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸² See Claire Duchen, *Feminism in France: From May ’68 to Mitterand*. (New York: Routledge, 1986).

battles” for free abortion, anti-rape policies, and other women’s issues, while keeping the decision-making power of the movement in a diffuse general assembly. Yet while she emphasizes that the group drew democratic inspiration from the ‘general’ May movement despite its differences, she also casts their analytic and political differences as an organizational challenge:

[C]ertain elements of the front (feminists) were conscious that we had made a political structure from the ground up that already represented a danger for the collective movement concerning all women. Structures of this kind can easily be controlled... And we did not want to become an “organization” that alone spoke in the name of women. The political analysis of PCF and leftist groups (very different in their functions, the democratic centralization, the party line, etc.). So we feminists were conscious of the fact that our political role was to agitate, to serve as a catalyst, to stimulate public opinion and so on, so that centralized organizations (the elite) would take direction from women’s fights.⁴⁸³

Casting the democratic structure of the MLF as one under threat of being “controlled” by a centralized structure, Wittig thus understood the MLF as a provisional, fleeting space in which to learn and “take direction from” from women’s on-the-ground fights – in a more theoretical vocabulary, it was for her a space in which to take seriously the *existence* of women as subjects of the movement. Rather than imposing an analytic definition of ‘women’ derived from ontological or rhetorical claims, Wittig insisted that such attempts, even when deployed for rhetorical effect (as, for example, in calls for ‘class’ solidarity amongst women), were a “danger for the collective movement concerning all women.” From the earliest stages of the MLF, then, Wittig’s political approach was attuned to what she would later theorize as the “point of view” of the oppressed.

Wittig’s political intuition – that rhetorical calls for a women’s consciousness would work against local, on-the-ground struggles – was soon borne out in several

⁴⁸³ Wittig papers, Box 29, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

episodes she considered to be indicative of feminism's co-optation by the straight mind. By the late 1970s, for example, a major fault line in the movement was clear: did certain members of the MLF have the right or the analytic authority to insist that there was a "right" way to achieve liberation? On one side of the debate, a group of lesbian feminists (including both Wittig and Christine Delphy) called for the dissolution of the MLF so as to promote a democratically inclusive space. "We followed the example of *March 22*, which dissolved itself right after May '68," Wittig recalls, "demonstrating that it did not have pretensions of 'leading' the political battles in France." Like the March 22 group, the move to dissolve the formal structure of the MLF would permit opportunities to learn about the perspectives of women on the ground: "We wanted to make the diversity of groups apparent, as well as their divergences," she writes. "We wanted to incite a multiplicity of small groups all over where women worked, to end the notion of an inside and an outside (as in the MLF), to find other forms of action in relation to our responsibility to agitate – but not as leaders of women." On the other side, a group of "Freudian" feminists – later renamed as *Psychoanalyse et Politique* ('Psych et Po') – argued for the centralization of the MLF under the auspices a kind of standpoint premised on reclaiming "femininity" and "women's difference." Though the groups had been able to function together in the early years of the movement, acrimony between them grew throughout the 1970s, culminating in Psych et Po's attempt to trademark – to quite literally *own* – the movement.⁴⁸⁴

For Wittig, the split with Psych et Po recast the issue of lesbian *existence* in the movement in an urgent – and unflattering – light. Though the schism between lesbian

⁴⁸⁴ For a fuller account of this episode, see Duchén 1986.

feminists and the members of *Psych et Po* began as a strategic and political one, Wittig and Delphy soon found their critical point of view discredited in the general assembly. Accused of wanting to “be like men” (in fact, Wittig recounts that her political perspective earned her the disreputable nickname ‘mec,’ a slang term akin to ‘guy’), Wittig (and to some extent Delphy) was accused of seeking to splinter women’s feminine unity by insisting that the MLF attend to lesbian issues. From Wittig’s perspective, in seeking to radically reclaim “femininity” for the purposes of women’s liberation, *Psych et Po* began to consider other political and analytic approaches to critique as threats to the movement itself;⁴⁸⁵ just as importantly, *Psych et Po*’s attempts to reclaim femininity – coupled with their claims that their political opponents were not “real” women – had the effect of locally reinforcing the bait and switch logic of the straight mind from within the movement itself. If Wittig would later come to theorize the straight mind as a logic in which “there remains... a core of nature which resists examination, a relationship excluded from the social in the analysis – a relationship whose characteristic is ineluctability in culture, as well as in nature, and which is the heterosexual relationship,” we might read *Psych et Po*’s derision of Wittig and Delphy as “mecs” as a local reification of the ‘natural’ division of humanity into ‘men and women.’ Whereas ‘real

⁴⁸⁵ Here is how Duchén put the matter: “*Psych et Po* present a global analysis in the light of which the women involved can engage in a particular kind of struggle for a particular kind of women’s liberation: everything can be explained in terms of women’s radical alterity, difference. The group’s actions derive closely from their analysis, indeed the group’s emphasis on theory was itself never the problem: what became the problem was the consequence of the crusade for recovery of the feminine in practical, tangible terms for the MLF [...] In a sense, the registration of the name and logo of the women’s movement was a logical conclusion to an analysis that insists that it is the only real challenge to patriarchy and does not accept the validity of any other. They could be seen as saving the MLF from ‘feminism.’” *Feminism in France*, 36-37.

women' were those who understood (and accepted) the unifying power of natural femininity, lesbians who resisted this critical stance were labeled separatists, mecs, and splinterers. Under Psych et Po's logic, resisting feminine unity "means [that] one 'wants to dissociate from 'other women' [...] Therefore... destroying any attempt to autonomy by lesbians is *not* oppressing lesbians, is acting right and politically (from a feminist point of view)."⁴⁸⁶ In reifying the presumed relationship between men and women – and in so doing, discounting and mocking the lesbian point of view – Wittig saw in the Psych et Po episode a political dynamic that enabled the co-optation of critique by anti-democratic forces.

As a local operation of power, the episode with Psych et Po was symbolic of a larger point for Wittig: that the straight mind functions by foreclosing the articulation of struggles from the point of view of oppression, and by insisting that one either accept the terms of critique as given in power or not speak at all. In her personal reflections and correspondence on the movement, for instance, Wittig clearly associates this episode with a larger 'malaise' concerning lesbian organizing in France. If Psych et Po's attempt to trademark the name and logo of the MLF was for Wittig a "stranglehold" on the movement which "dispossessed all women of that which defines their political approach,"⁴⁸⁷ this exercise of the straight mind was for her only one iteration of a trend to label autonomous lesbian groups as splinterers so as to discount their political claims. Consider, for example, Wittig's description of the attempt to bring the International Lesbian Front, a group formed by lesbian activists across Europe in 1974, to France.

⁴⁸⁶ Letter to Adrienne Rich, 1981. Wittig papers, Box 29.

⁴⁸⁷ Statement against the MLF trademark, cited in Duchon 1986.

During their inaugural August meeting, French lesbian activists posed the question of the relationship between lesbian groups and the MLF:

In particular we asked why we were called “revolutionary feminists,” even though we were all lesbians (there were one or two heteros per protest). Someone then proposed to publicize that fact – that it was a bad idea to hide – that the “revolutionary feminists” were all lesbians. There was a great moment of elation... We finally understood that the problem was not being told that it was the lesbians who separated us feminists from other women but that the problem was being lesbians without saying it (c.f. to be in the movement’s closet). At exactly the moment of the International Lesbian Front’s creation we felt the great impact of its creation.

For Wittig, the feminist ‘line’ that *women* were the real subjects of feminism, despite the fact that “we were all lesbians,” operated as a way to keep lesbians from constituting themselves as subjects of the movement; in other words, it functioned as a kind of “closet” in which lesbian existence was systematically denied.

More to the point, however, was Wittig’s split with Delphy over the issue of lesbianism in debates over the future of *Questions Féministes*. Although Delphy and Wittig had worked together in opposition to the Psych et Po episode (and despite Delphy’s own homosexuality), the strain over whether lesbianism constituted a valid “point of view” – or whether, as so many MLF members had claimed, it was simply a way to splinter ‘women’ – soon wore on the members of *QF*. Delphy, whose own work had led her to develop the interpellative claims that Disch so admires, began to publicly narrate the schism along the same rhetorical lines as had Psych et Po. Wittig, for her part, strongly disagreed with what she saw as yet another attempt to reduce lesbian existence to an issue of women’s solidarity. In an interview with Wittig in the feminist magazine *off our backs*, for instance, Wittig and Delphy narrate the divide in this way:

WITTIG: In Revolutionary Feminists, some women said, we are all lesbian, why not announce that we are all lesbians, but then the resistance of some persons

within the group made it impossible for us. The pretext was that we would cut off other women. But anyway we were cut. This was not a good reason for me. DELPHY: The problem seemed to be decided because a lot of women became lesbians. But also there developed – but in a very informal, subtle way that was never made explicit – a lesbian ideology within the group. Women in that group were supposed to be lesbians, or they were expected not to have relationships with men. So what happened was that heterosexual women did not talk anymore about their heterosexual problems. So since they didn't talk about it, it was as if they didn't have relationships with men. But they dropped out, which is not necessarily a good thing. The conflict was not solved. But nobody talked about it, there was no discussion, it was through a very subtle imposition of the idea that there was no problem, there were no heterosexuals, heterosexuals didn't have a space, they didn't have a space as heterosexuals anymore. WITTIG: What are you saying? I think that many lesbians in Paris are being oppressed by this process, which came down from the general leaders of the movement.⁴⁸⁸

While it is certainly possible to cast their divergent interpretations of the MLF's ills as products of their distinctive critical stances, Wittig clearly associated Delphy's claim that it was the *lesbians* who represented a political constraint on the movement with the same anti-democratic bait and switch that she had begun to theorize as the straight mind. In a letter to Simone de Beauvoir about the schism within *QF*, for instance, she writes that Delphy's position was akin to the experiences lesbians had faced for a decade in the MLF:

For a long time in the movement in Paris there have been those lesbians who purge other lesbians – as *feminists* – while giving themselves credit for being feminists, lesbians, or homosexuals (homosexuals in the closet of feminism). And one tries to politically form a lesbian front, and here they are, crying foul: “It is excessive.” “This has already been settled.” (surely since the Red Dykes). “You try to cut feminists off from “other” women”... And finally: “There isn't need for a lesbian front in France because all feminists are lesbians.” Which means: we'll do all we can do to prevent you from existing. And they do it – witness this affair at QF. And to finish, among feminists in Paris they are the legitimate ones and we, we are the crazy ones.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁸ Interview in *off our backs*, 1979. Wittig Papers, Box 29.

⁴⁸⁹ Letter to Simone de Beauvoir, 1981. Wittig Papers, Box 29.

If Psych et Po had capitulated to the bait and switch of the straight mind by reifying ‘men and women’ as *natural* categories, then, in Wittig’s view Delphy’s insistence on *rhetorical* solidarity fell victim to the same co-optative logic.

Most telling for Wittig – and, I would argue, most formative of her insistence that critique ought to intervene in and divest from this insidious logic – was the fact that this tendency caused Delphy to begin framing the problem as one in which oppression can be experienced multi-directionally, on two sides of a debate. In the *off our backs* interview, for instance, Delphy and Wittig clash over whether the dissolution of the MLF was an example of oppressive power constraining the existence of certain subjects, or whether it represented a situation in which “both sides” had been wronged:

Delphy: We have to get to the other side of the story too. We have to hear both sides.

Wittig: Oh, Christine. You don’t want to listen. She said, “I felt oppressed.” We have to listen to this oppression.⁴⁹⁰

Delphy’s refusal to fully acknowledge lesbians as a political force within the movement – and her accusations that lesbians like Wittig “split” an otherwise coherent class of women – demonstrated for Wittig the ways that the bait and switch of oppressive logic can even take hold of those who seek to show femininity to be political. For Wittig, the political point is that when one attempts to hear “both sides,” one will only hear in it the dominant logic. If even Christine Delphy – the very intellectual who had shown men and women to be political categories – could fall victim to this logic, Wittig would later theorize that the only way to grasp the operations of the straight mind is to “listen to this oppression” from the *point of view* of the oppressed.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview in *off our backs*, 1979. Wittig papers, Box 29.

In both the MLF and *QF*, then, Wittig railed against attempts to resignify or rhetorically transform the terms on which women experience oppression. Both episodes, for Wittig, represented the *political pressure* to reduce the lesbian point of view to a more general identification with the class ‘women.’ The result, she argues, is a near-constant capitulation to the oppressive logic of the straight mind. In the case of *Psych et Po*, Wittig argued that the “feminine but not feminist” attempt to reclaim women’s power played into the hands of the straight mind: once *Psych et Po* “imposed an official discourse about women” that distanced feminism from democratic politics, “All of the Parisian intelligentsia on the right and the left gave sighs of relief. Feminism was dead: long live the feminine, femininity, and feminine pleasure.”⁴⁹¹ And when the issue of lesbianism was rehashed in the *QF* collective, Wittig insisted that the imperative to “reduce” the analysis of lesbianism to the larger class struggle of “women” condemns lesbians to be “unique, outside of the political context.” The issue, in both cases, is *very much* the question of lesbian existence: how can critique avoid reducing the analysis of particular oppressions to problems defined in a language foreign to those who experience it? In a word, how do we engage in a critique that does mistake oppression for grievances ‘on both sides’? After her experiences with the MLF in the ‘70s and *QF* in the ‘80s, Wittig was adamant that it was the impossibility of lesbian existence as political subjects of the movement – not the experience of women as a class – that best illuminated this tendency of power to lure movements away from a new point of view and back into the thought of domination.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., Wittig Papers, Box 29.

Conclusion

Finally, then, let me conclude by making the case that Wittig's framework, which is distinct from *both* standpoint theorists' and their "third wave" critics, is more closely aligned with the concerns of feminist publicity that I have previously argued characterizes lesbian feminism more broadly. Like Marilyn Frye, who I argued in Chapter 2 is concerned with what forms of divestment would be required to establish political relationships on radically different terms, Wittig's lesbian feminism seeks not only to identify or outline the shape of lesbian experiences so as to bring them to consciousness, but rather to call into question the necessity of all the economic, political, and cultural relationships – such as those that create categories like "men and women" – that sustain politics as usual. Moreover, though, she does so not by advocating for a straightforward form of separatism, but by suggesting an open-ended – I would say *coalitional* – process in which each individual member of the group "lesbians" must recognize the "real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class."⁴⁹²

It is easy, as I have suggested, to read Wittig as a kind of prophet – that is, a figure who heralded the coming of "third wave" feminist and queer theories even as she remains trapped by discredited frameworks like standpoint theory. However, to read her this way would be to displace her from the historical and political context in which she was writing, thereby evacuating the real substance of her work. Resisting this framework

⁴⁹² Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," 19.

would, instead, reveal Wittig's close relationship with the three key lessons of coalition building that I outlined in Chapter 3. First, Wittig consistently declines to define "lesbian" as an identity category. What it means to *be* a lesbian, she argues, is not at all the issue; instead, Wittig asks what sort of relationships would need to be established in order for lesbians, of all people, to achieve political *existence*. As I will outline in more detail in the next chapter, these relationships would, at minimum, need to be premised on a kind of mutual recognition, in which no subject is made to translate her experiences into foreign terms. Like the lesbian feminists of color in Chapter 3, then, Wittig insists that any transformative lesbianism must be premised not in identity, but in the promise of mutual recognition. Second, as her experiences with Psych et Po and Delphy make clear, Wittig saw this promise as having been radically breached in her own feminist context. For Wittig, even radical feminists are susceptible to the operations of the straight mind; to the extent that they are willing to obscure or erase *certain* feminists' claims in the name of political expediency, she argues, these feminists fail to take the lesson of seeing from the "point of view of the oppressed" to heart. Wittig argues that while failing to practice mutual accountability is a constant risk of political engagement, these moments are far from tolerable trade-offs in the movement towards a collective future. Instead, they constitute a radical breach in the very promise that feminism makes. Finally, Wittig suggests that the solution to these breaches is neither more unity – the insistence on a revolutionary consciousness – nor a turn towards resignification. Instead, she advocates a practice of what I would call repair. It is a practice of listening ("We must listen to this oppression"), of accounting (acknowledging that the challenge to lesbian existence is not

a problem “on both sides”), and working through (discovering the conditions that would enable feminists to face “the question of the subject of each singular woman.”)

Thus, Wittig shares with the lesbian feminist writers that have populated this work a key argument: that the goal of a lesbian feminist public is not simply to *include* or *speak for* all kinds of women. It’s more than that: the goal is to create a kind of public in which marginalized people are no longer required to translate themselves in order to be heard by the powerful and can, instead, be heard *in their own terms*. Wittig, like the other lesbian feminists I have foregrounded here, suggests that until and unless this form of reciprocity is established, feminists will have no idea what the marginalized really need, because in a significant sense, they have never been able to adequately call the social body to account. For lesbian feminists, then, we might say that the capacity to speak in their own terms is a *condition* of the new public they want to inaugurate.

What does this mean, in practice? Recall, first, that failures of accountability cannot be reduced to the kinds of injuries that we normally think of as constituting oppression or injustice. For example, the problem facing lesbian feminists are not simply that racism and homophobia *exclude* these subjects from fully participating in the economy by denying them jobs, or that they are barred from gaining the full rights of citizenship, however much these injustices may also be true. The specific problem that lesbian feminists identified throughout the 1980s was an additional injury: it is that no matter what they say, their claims will be minimized, misrecognized, or ignored because the responsibility to listen isn’t baked into the system itself. It is to this practice that I turn in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 5

“Our reality is the fictional:”

Wittig, Lorde, and the Lesbian Body Politic

“But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as humans... we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real.”

– Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

“Our reality is the fictional as it is socially accepted, our symbols deny the traditional symbols and are fictional for traditional male culture, and we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us.”

– Monique Wittig, “Introduction to *The Lesbian Body*”

Introduction

At the beginning of this work, I invoked the scene at the “*Second Sex: Thirty Years Later*” Conference to describe the ways that Black (and) lesbian feminisms in the 1980s are variously invoked in a meta-theoretical battle over the “correct” solutions to exclusion. There, I argued that contemporary theorists employ scenes such as the chaotic open mic session following Audre Lorde’s “Master’s Tools” remarks as evidence of the flawed ways that feminists during the 1980s proposed to deal with differences between women. At the same time, contemporary theorists suggest, these purported flaws of 1980s feminisms evidence the urgent need to attend to intra-group power and privilege – a need that they figure as ground zero for the methodological innovations of 1990s queer theory. However, as I have been arguing, the narrative about the 1980s as the “eruption of difference” that evidences the exclusionary failures of second wave feminism and,

therefore, the need for poststructural critique is, in fact, a myth *imposed* back onto the period. I have shown, for example, that closer attention to largely forgotten lesbian political archives such as the magazine *Sinister Wisdom* reveal a deep concern about developing relational, reparative practices that address racial and other intra-group inequalities. In keeping with these claims, this work has asked: How does the advent of queer theory – and the just-so story it tells about itself – obscure this concern with repair, and to what political effect has it done so?

However much these questions require granular attention to the complex histories of feminism, reconstructing the lesbian feminist archive also suggests political and conceptual questions that are broader in scope. In what ways, for example, do the relational and reparative frames that lesbians developed exceed the critiques of “identity” that have characterized their misreading? How, if at all, do lesbian political thinkers of the 1980s – those who were expressly concerned with theorizing the democratic possibilities of a reparative politics – resist incorporation into the narratives of identity, fracture, and wounded attachments that legitimize queer critique and politics today? And what resources do these resistances offer for a more robust intersectional politics in the contemporary moment? This chapter explores these questions by probing the interlocking investments in the work of two writers deeply involved in the scene at NYU and, indeed, throughout the 1980s: Monique Wittig and Audre Lorde. In contrast to those frameworks that pose “identity” as the primary political frame of the 1980s, I will argue that these two thinkers are in fact engaged in a politics of repair that far exceeds post-hoc assessments of identity politics, and that grappling more deeply with the substance of their work displaces and decenters several paradigmatic debates in political theory today.

Contemporary theorists, following the commonplace misreading of the 1980s, for instance, tend to think of Lorde and Wittig as having lingering attachments to the politics of identity *in spite of* their sophisticated theories of language and social construction. As such, they are claimed by queer theorists as imperfect antecedents; they prefigure and legitimize queer theory's methodological maneuvers, even as they provide evidence of the political and conceptual failures of 1980s feminisms. However, I will argue in what follows that this (mis)reading of Lorde and Wittig is limited for two reasons. First, it narrows the value of these two writers' work to what is useful for queer theory, and dismisses the rest as contradictory or confounding. But as I will argue below, reading Lorde's and Wittig's lingering attachments to Black and lesbian identities as simply incongruous with their better impulses has meant that the thematic of the speaking subject – and therefore the substantive politics of repair – that they develop is seldom fully appreciated. Second, however, because this misreading has been taken up as an established fact in broader contemporary debates over concepts like identity, agency, and recognition, political theory as a field has failed to grapple with the substantive political resources that a lesbian politics of repair offer. To take stock of the ways in which Wittig's and Lorde's writing exceeds debates over identity, agency, and recognition by placing them in conversation with the larger lesbian feminist writing community, I argue, is to uncover a fuller, more robust politics – a politics that far exceeds frameworks that interpret these thinkers as imperfect antecedents to queer critique. In this chapter, then, I will insist on the historical and conceptual resonances of Wittig's and Lorde's reparative framework *beyond* their presence in queer theory. Doing so, I will suggest, illuminates

the shared political investments of lesbian feminists as they sought to articulate a transformational politics based on “a world of possibility for us all.”⁴⁹³

Specifically, I will argue for reading the entanglements between these two thinkers – and the politics of Black (and) lesbian identity they articulate – by pointing out their shared investments in three key grounds. First, both writers exemplify an investment in theorizing inequality in terms of what I call “relations of moral vulnerability.” Such relations, for both thinkers, are born of structured asymmetries in the ability to call others to account; they are characterized, as Lorde puts it, by the compulsory use of language “which has been made to work against us.”⁴⁹⁴ Both Lorde and Wittig respond to this problem by suggesting that under conditions of moral vulnerability, one of the first real *needs* of the oppressed is the need to speak oneself in one’s own terms. The lived need to speak that appears in both Wittig’s and Lorde’s work cannot be reduced (as it often is) to the discredited idea that using identity categories or making claims on existing authorities can displace structures of oppression. Second, both thinkers share an investment in rectifying the structured patterns of misrecognition that symptomatize power. Such an *accounting* for moral vulnerability requires not “more thorough” critical lenses, but rather reparative practices such as reclaiming the “utopian dimensions” of the social contract. This reclamation requires attention to another common conceptual target of contemporary queer theorists: recognition. I will argue that Wittig’s and Lorde’s use of the term suggests that a fuller attention to the self-determination required by recognition is

⁴⁹³ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” reprinted in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 112.

⁴⁹⁴ Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Speech and Action,” in *Sister Outsider*, 43.

irreducible to the kinds of debates that have preoccupied critics and advocates of the term for the last thirty years. Finally, both thinkers share an investment in the power of language to repair – even remake – the body politic in which moral vulnerabilities occur. I conclude the chapter by reflecting briefly on how these undervalued entanglements illuminate the ongoing and unresolved project of intersectionality in political theory. I argue that a renewed commitment to intersectionality in political theory ought to take place alongside concerns about the “lesbian body politic” found in Wittig and Lorde.

Wittig and Lorde: Misfits, Disruptors, Vanishing Mediators

The central argument of this chapter is that the “lesbian body politic” articulated by Wittig and Lorde, although it hangs on the concepts “identity,” “agency,” and “recognition,” is not reducible to the debates over these terms that have become commonplace in political theory. Nevertheless, as I have suggested throughout this work, the commonplace narrative about the 1980s – that its ascendant identitarian framework undercut the radical political purchase of feminism – depends on the assumption that all claims about identity and recognition fit predictably into the kinds of regressive politics that have become standard targets of critical theory since the 1990s. Claims like those made by Wittig, Lorde, and many other Black (and) lesbian theorists, therefore, are seen by many academics concerned with the paradoxes of freedom as bearing the regrettable imprints of failed feminisms past. While in the next several sections I will argue that this interpretation is both inaccurate and reductive, it is worth first understanding why and how Wittig and Lorde are seen as “problems” in queer theory, even as queer theorists claim a debt to their work.

Wittig and Lorde are figures akin to what Kathi Weeks has described as “vanishing mediators” in queer theory, having inaugurated a conversation about difference within feminism only to be dismissed for having failed to solve the very problem they pose. Weeks, borrowing the term herself from Jameson’s analysis of the Protestant work ethic, describes the vanishing mediator not only as an intellectual predecessor whose ideas are taken up and developed over time, but as a figure who “serves the more dramatic function of a bearer of change that sows the seeds of [her] own extinction.”⁴⁹⁵ Weeks argues that the vanishing mediator is one compelling lens through which to interpret “feminist time,” in which certain works and ideas are repeatedly cited as causal forces even as their content and substance is “excised” from the politics of the present. Throughout this work, I have argued that lesbian feminists in general – and here, that Wittig and Lorde in particular – serve just such a purpose; they are (mis)interpreted in queer theory as having posed the problem of difference for feminism only to render themselves irrelevant, remaining ensnared by the lure of stable identities and agents.

As Lisa Disch has persuasively detailed, for example, Wittig cuts an imposing figure in queer theory’s just-so story, even as thinkers like Judith Butler cast their “debt” to her as a kind of partial disavowal. “There may be intimations of a theory of performative subjectivity in her work,” Disch ventriloquizes the common wisdom, but she “needs a Butler to point them out to her.”⁴⁹⁶ Although Wittig notices the power of language to shape (and reshape) the social field, the problems with Wittig’s approach in

⁴⁹⁵ Kathi Weeks, “The Vanishing *Dialectic*: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s,” in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(4), October 2015; 740.

⁴⁹⁶ Lisa Disch, “‘French Theory’ Goes to France: Trouble *dans le Genre* and ‘Materialist’ Feminism – A Conversation Manqué,” *Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, ed. Carver and Chambers. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 53.

both Butler's and Disch's accounts arise in Wittig's failure to fully deconstruct the "agent" as the basis of political action:

Left to her own devices, Wittig defines 'the feminine' as 'an "attribute" of a gender,' subscribes to a voluntarist and instrumental view of language, and succumbs to an 'existential-materialist' predisposition to 'presume the subject, the person, to have a prosocial and pregendered integrity.'"⁴⁹⁷

In other words, if Butler's Wittig fails to fully appreciate the radically constructed (i.e. "performative") nature of identity, it is because she clings to the outmoded notion that politics requires the recognition – not the transgression – of the very notion of the agential subject. In effect, because she fails to disentangle the relationship between identity and the agent, the Wittig that appears in Butler's work fails to understand how her account of lesbian "identity" becomes implicated in regressive, normative, or disciplinary politics that recapitulate the very exclusions that render "the lesbian" unthinkable in the first place. Thus, what is accepted as queer theory's "debt" to Wittig is her insistence on the capacity of language to shape the real. At the same time, though, the *substance* of her politics – its insistence on embodying the *agent who speaks* – is cast away as a regrettable and excisable holdover.

The substance of Audre Lorde's politics has suffered a similar fate in the pages of queer theory's foundational works, although Lorde as a *figure* has been more fully absorbed into queer theorists' narratives of their own work. Indeed, much ink has been spilled in appropriating Audre Lorde as a "postmodern," a precursor to queer theory despite her dogged, and apparently inconsistent, insistence on lesbian feminism. Indeed, although Lorde consistently spoke of her own identities "as a Black lesbian feminist

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

warrior poet mother,” queer theorists have nonetheless gone about the business of discrediting this dimension of her work as a regrettable and dismissible relic of the times. As Linda Garber notes on the one hand, “Queer critics who turn to Audre Lorde’s work use her multiple positioning, the moral/political force invoked by the particular locations she inhabits, and her widespread influence on lesbian and feminist politics and theory to shore up their constructivist position and to oppose what they see as lesbian feminism’s naïve essentialism.”⁴⁹⁸ At the same time, however, much of the substance of Lorde’s writing is understood to be “at odds” with this more innately post-structural core: as Harriet Malinowitz puts it, Lorde’s constant rhetorical appeals to her own stable identity seem to undercut her more post-structural moments:

Absolutely central to post-structuralist theory is the notion that thought and action are the *products* of language, and that the only “self” is one which is discursively produced... Lorde, on the other hand, seems to be positing... an inner self which precedes language, and which can decide independently of it whether or not to enter its domain and employ it as a transparent medium of expression. In this sense, Lorde’s entire conceptualization of speech, silence, and truth – the latter of which she seems to consider knowable and articulable – are at complete odds with postmodern conceptions of the same.⁴⁹⁹

Like readings of Wittig as being only partially assimilable into the idiom of queer theory – a quality that leads many theorists following Judith Butler to conclude that her work is, simply, imperfect – Lorde’s work is often simultaneously claimed as an imperfect, and somewhat confounding, antecedent to poststructural theories.

⁴⁹⁸ Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); 99.

⁴⁹⁹ Harriet Malinowitz, “Lesbian Studies and Postmodern Queer Theory,” in *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zimmerman and McNaron. (New York: Feminist Press, 1996); 266-267.

If both Wittig and Lorde pose a problem for queer theory, it is because they seem at once to signal a methodological affinity with post-structuralism while hewing strongly to a political commitment to identity, recognition, and the speaking subject. How should we interpret these apparent contradictions? Are Wittig and Lorde simply disruptors and misfits? Are they imperfect antecedents, “vanishing mediators” who inaugurated a profoundly new discourse only to be retroactively excised from it? Or have we simply failed to see their innate post-structuralism for what it really is? For many observers of this apparent contradiction, responding to these questions requires putting these paradigmatic thinkers of the 1980s back “into contact” with the queer theories that have partially claimed them. It is no coincidence, then, that both Disch and Malinowitz advise theorists “in the twenty-first century,” as Malinowitz puts it, to “find ways of alchemizing [these] apparent contradictions into new funds of knowledge... to put disparate interpretive systems into contact with one another to discover, if not common ground, then at least new kinds of conversations whose tensions can recharge our work and offer it fresh direction.”⁵⁰⁰ For Disch, finding the points of contact between, say, a Wittig and a Butler reveals a shared *political* truth despite all of their differences: quoting Karen Barad, Disch argues that while Wittig and Butler disagree on the status of the “agent” in language, their theories can both be productively put to work towards the “contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.”⁵⁰¹ The best we can

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 268.

⁵⁰¹ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs* 28 no. 3 (2003): 803. Cited in Disch, “‘French Theory’ Goes to France,” 60.

offer, then, would seem to be a “fusing of horizons” that promises a fuller account of the continuities and disjunctures that characterize the passage of feminist time.

However much contemporary political theorists may wish to allay the problems of Wittig’s and Lorde’s appeals to identity, agency, and recognition by reconciling them with queer theory’s full-throated post-structuralism, though, such ways of “alchemizing” this encounter cannot explain away what are, in fact, incredibly consistent elements of Lorde’s and Wittig’s work. Rather than seeking points of contact that enable the fusing of these two horizons, then, in the pages that follow I will argue strongly against the desire to allow Wittig and Lorde to remain queer theory’s vanishing mediators. I do so in part because I think such an interpretation of their role in feminist theory fundamentally misreads several key dimensions of their respective theorizations of injustice, and in part because by participating in this misreading today, political theorists fail to appreciate how their work radically alters the terms of debate in which injustice and redress are typically understood. In order to understand Wittig and Lorde without appeal to their “unresolved” relationship to queer theory, then, we will not only have to disarticulate their theories from the usual frameworks for interpreting the 1980s, as previous chapters have proposed, but we will also have to disentangle their work from the debates that have emerged in the wake of this particular misreading of the 1980s as an imperfect antecedent to post-structuralism. In particular, this chapter will focus on the ways that debates around “identity,” “agency,” and “recognition” have linked any usage of these terms to regressive, conservative, or exclusionary politics. In so doing, participants in these debates have unnecessarily ignored how turning to identity and recognition mobilizes a *transformation* in the social body in both Wittig’s and Lorde’s writings.

Injustice as the Reduction of Language

Let me now add another wrinkle to the familiar trope of 1980s lesbian feminism as queer theory's imperfect antecedent. In addition to having failed to adequately deconstruct the "agent," the familiar narrative within feminist and queer theory goes something like this: because identity entails claiming a stable agent, an "I" or "we" that does not and cannot exist, these kinds of claims obscure "how feminist theory has confused the condition of one group of [white, middle class, straight] women with the condition of all."⁵⁰² In other words: feminists ought to be incredibly wary of claims about women's identity as an oppressed class, because such claims require structured patterns of misrecognition – that is, those articulations of an agential "we" that systematically erase or obscure the perspectives of *certain* women. Indeed, it is precisely this suspicion of identity as masking a fundamental asymmetry that underwrites queer criticism's concern about Wittig and Lorde's lingering attachments to the agent who speaks. However, a concern about the conflation of "the condition of one group of women with the condition of all" need not negate, invalidate, or render suspect Wittig and Lorde's emphasis on identity, agency, and recognition. Quite the opposite: I will argue that this insight about the asymmetry of address is fundamentally true, and that on a basic level it accurately describes what thinkers like Lorde and Wittig share with the larger Black (and) lesbian writing community. However, I will also suggest that problems emerge when debates over how feminist and queer theorists ought to respond to this insight

⁵⁰² Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 4.

politically become narrowly associated with disciplinary debates in political theory, such as those over recognition.

Like many lesbian writers during the 1980s, both Lorde and Wittig saw their primary task as articulating the difficulties of *speaking* about Blackness and lesbianism at all. Lorde, for example, frequently describes the imposition of silence about one's experiences as a primary tool of power, in which "enforced silence, the inability to speak, the refusal to speak is a very violent silence, where you know there is a great deal happening but it's not spoken."⁵⁰³ Such "enforced silences," for Lorde, are at the root of injustice. Nowhere does Lorde articulate the effects of such impositions on the oppressed more eloquently than in her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action:"

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, 'Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out' [...] In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation... Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.⁵⁰⁴

Here, Lorde suggests that silence is an imposition – it is a "constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision"⁵⁰⁵ born out of fear of recrimination, judgment, and misrecognition.

⁵⁰³ Karla Hammond, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *The American Poetry Review* 9(2), 1980; 18.

⁵⁰⁴ Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (New York: Crossing Press, 2007 [1987]); 42.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

Moreover, however, such silences are impositions that prevent only *certain* people – “Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am a lesbian, because I am myself”⁵⁰⁶ – from being or becoming “a whole person.” In short, the imposition of silence is a fundamental condition of power, in that it renders the powerless unable to articulate “that one little piece inside of you that wants to be spoken out,” and in so doing legitimizes “that language” – racism, heterosexism, homophobia – “which has been made to work against us.”⁵⁰⁷

Lorde thus argues that despite the silences imposed on the oppressed, the ability to articulate oneself “is an act of self-revelation” that combats the fact that “we were never meant to survive.” Articulating *identity* – “that little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out” – is not simply a matter of an attachment to epistemological stability; it is “a survival situation.” “If we don’t name ourselves, we are nothing,” Lorde once explained. “As a Black woman I have to deal with identity or I don’t exist at all. I can’t depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will... So either I’m going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival situation.”⁵⁰⁸ Identity claims, then, are not a relic of the times; they are precisely the mode in which Lorde imagines the oppressed will struggle against the silences that are imposed on them.

It is no coincidence, I think, that in teaching her own work to students at the University of Arizona, Wittig assigned her own essay “The Mark of Gender” alongside Lorde’s essay on silence.⁵⁰⁹ Indeed, reading the pieces alongside one another suggests

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁰⁸ Karla Hammond, “An Interview with Audre Lorde,” 19.

⁵⁰⁹ Monique Wittig Papers, Box 29, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

that both writers were deeply concerned with the kinds of hierarchies that impose structured silences on *certain* women, making it impossible for Black (and) lesbian women to speak themselves “as human beings.” In the opening sentences of *The Straight Mind* collection, for example, Wittig describes the “category of sex” as a form of “censorship” and “concealment” that obscures both the real and discursive existence of lesbians. Like Lorde’s claims about imposed silences, the “censorship” that Wittig describes functions by denying lesbians the “authority of speech” in several interlocking ways. Like Lorde’s suggestion that “we were never meant to survive... as human beings,” Wittig argues that categories like “gender,” “sex,” and “race” operate to “wrest from women what belongs to them by right: conceiving of oneself as a total subject through the exercise of language.”⁵¹⁰ In other words, because gender, sex, and race force Black (and) lesbian women from speaking only *in relation to* the universal straight, white, male subject, these categories “force them to make their entrance [into language] in a crablike way, particularizing themselves and apologizing profusely.”⁵¹¹ Elsewhere, Wittig notes that such “crablike” gestures make it impossible for women, let alone Black (and) lesbian women, to appear in language as full subjects: “newspapers still today,” she writes, “report that ‘two students and a woman,’ ‘two lawyers and a woman,’ ‘three travelers and a woman’ were seen doing this or that.”⁵¹² To be denied the capacity to articulate oneself as a subject *in language*, then, is to be denied the very condition of being recognized as a full participant in the social body.

⁵¹⁰ Wittig, “The Mark of Gender,” *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 81.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵¹² Wittig, “The Category of Sex,” *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 8.

Second, like Lorde, Wittig describes this impossibility of speaking as a human being – a subject – as the basic condition of power: “Sex, under the name of gender,” she writes,

permeates the whole body of language and forces every locutor, if she belongs to the oppressed sex, to proclaim it in her speech, that is, to appear in language under her proper physical form and not under the abstract form, which every male locutor has the unquestioned right to use... One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men.... It is an act, a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another.⁵¹³

To “appropriate” the ability to speak – to reserve the capacity to be or become “a whole person” – for oneself, is for both Lorde and Wittig a foundational violence that cannot be explained away by the epistemological instability of the agent. It is a political act that, as Lorde puts it, denies “the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others.”⁵¹⁴ The result of this criminal, political act, writes Wittig, “is to deny [us] any claim to the abstract, philosophical, political discourses that give shape to the social body.”⁵¹⁵ If the condition of power is to prevent Black (and) lesbian women from articulating themselves as full participants in the social body, then an adequate political response will, at minimum, require the restoration of this capacity to become a subject to Black (and) lesbian women. Lesbian feminist theory in the 1980s, then, is “left with the question of the subject of each singular woman – not the myth, but each one of us.”⁵¹⁶

⁵¹³ “The Mark of Gender,” 79-80.

⁵¹⁴ Lorde, “Transformation,” 43.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵¹⁶ Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” 19.

Because debates over the merits of post-structuralism have turned on complex questions about the relation of the cultural and the economic, the symbolic and the real, or the signifiatory and the material,⁵¹⁷ contemporary theorists tend to misread these stated concerns in Wittig and Lorde, as we saw in the section above, as questions about whether we can or should consider identity to “exist” prior to language. But such questions obscure more than they reveal about these thinkers. Such debates do not, for instance, explain how Wittig could hold *both* that “lesbians are not women” *and* that “Nevertheless, and rather than despairing of ever understanding, we must recognize the *need to reach subjectivity* in the abandonment by many of us to the myth ‘woman.’”⁵¹⁸ They cannot explain what Lorde meant in her poem “A Litany for Survival” when she wrote that despite the overwhelming fear that accompanies speech, “but when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive.”⁵¹⁹ These articulations of a *need* in Lorde and Wittig to express oneself in language far exceeds methodological debates over the temporal relationship between language and the material, or indeed over how identity is constituted at all; it bespeaks an active politics born of the practice of *reaching for subjectivity*. Debates such as those concerned with Wittig and Lorde as imperfect antecedents to queer post-structuralism not only fail to adequately grapple with this need, they actively reject it as an ancillary or excisable attachment to identity politics. But I would argue that, on a closer reading of

⁵¹⁷ See, for example, the debate between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler over the domain of “culture.” Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural;” Nancy Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 279-289.

⁵¹⁸ Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” 19.

⁵¹⁹ Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” *The Black Unicorn*. (New York: Norton, 1995 [1978]), 31

these two thinkers, this need – this *reaching* – for subjectivity is far from an ancillary or excisable attachment; it is in fact a central thematic.

If debates over the relationship between language and the material cannot capture this need, then that the framework of moral vulnerability that I argued in Chapter 3 was central to the larger lesbian feminist writing community can better explain these elements of Wittig's and Lorde's writing. On this view, the problems of feminist theory – problems that arose in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*, at the "Second Sex at 30" conference, and indeed, ones that still plague feminist coalitions today – are born not of "difference" or "exclusion," but of *asymmetries of address* that produce a real, embodied need for speech itself. As Lester Olson put it in his assessment of Audre Lorde's intervention in the *Second Sex* conference, for example, Lorde consistently writes that the problem of oppression is not only economic or political in nature, but is also one of "rhetorical forms" that obfuscate asymmetrical "communicative practices across social differences."⁵²⁰ "Examples of such practices," Olson writes,

include silencing others, excluding others from public forums and rendering them invisible in the process, devaluing others' remarks when they do speak, speaking for or about others, misnaming others' practices in order to dominate them, appropriating others by treating them as tokens, using others for legitimation, or blaming others for their under-representation."⁵²¹

Such asymmetries, as Wittig would later go on to argue, are not so much problems of difference solved by making stronger appeals to Western humanism (as Butler misreads her), but are instead problems that inhere in the structured patterns of misrecognition that symptomize hierarchy. Such asymmetries of address, as I suggested in Chapters 3 and 4,

⁵²⁰ Lester Olson, "The Personal, The Political, and Others: Audre Lorde Denouncing "The Second Sex Conference," in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 33 no. 3 (2000): 261.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

are instances of *moral vulnerabilities*, where “the vulnerability in question is the potential for being exposed to the insult and additional injury, when we perceive ourselves wronged, of having our standing to call others to account denied, dismissed, or ignored in ways that call our very status as full participants into question.”⁵²² Thus, when we consider only the epistemological problems of identity or agency, we only see part of the problem. Such debates over the “correct” relationship between discourse, speech acts, and subjects in fact abandon the granular, intersubjective questions that appear when we consider who is *capable* of speech, when, and in what terms. This analysis, which underwrites both Wittig’s and Lorde’s concern with speaking subjects, suggest that relations of vulnerability operate through asymmetries of address. These asymmetries, in turn, produce structured pattern of misrecognition which Lorde and Wittig theorize as taking place through the systematic reduction of political grammar to *certain* concepts (sex, gender, race) while foreclosing others.

To be sure, defenders of both Wittig and Lorde have realized that this aspect of their writing – the emphasis on using language to “appropriate” subjectivity for oneself – cannot be easily dismissed as a historical accident. Wittig critics such as Teresa de Lauretis, Linda Zerilli, and Lisa Disch⁵²³ have pointed out that her insistence on building lesbian subjectivity is a project of freedom – “a political phenomenon... that is inconceivable outside the realm of action and speech.”⁵²⁴ Similarly, Linda Garber argues

⁵²² Margaret Urban Walker, “Moral Vulnerability and the Task of Reparations,” 112.

⁵²³ See Teresa de Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,” *Feminist Studies*, 16 no. 1 (1990): 115-150; Linda Zerilli, “A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig’s Poetic Revolution,” *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Shaktini. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); 87-114; Disch, “‘French Theory’ Goes to France.”

⁵²⁴ Linda Zerilli, “A New Grammar of Difference,” 90.

of Lorde that her “identity poetics” suggest the need to consider identity not as a stable category in which one articulates an “I-will,” but as a kind of discursive “stance.”

Like *lesbian*, the word *warrior* began to appear on equal semantic and grammatical footing with *Black*, *feminist*, *woman*, and other markers of Lorde’s identity in various permutations of her oft-quoted litany in the late 1970s... Obviously, warrior is not a traditionally recognized category of identity or oppression. The term functions as a stance, a battle position(ality). Its prominence in Lorde’s identity poetics litany makes it clear that the other more conventional identity markers function as stances as well.⁵²⁵

But while theorists such as Zerilli and Garber argue that the practice of deploying identity as a poetic “stance” suggest that this use of subjectivity is primarily a rhetorical or conceptual exercise that opens space for “new [grammars] of difference,”⁵²⁶ I would go further. Both Wittig and Lorde intend the use of language for appropriating subjectivity to be a *political* practice in its own right.

For Lorde, for example, the silences born of moral vulnerabilities are not only conceptual or poetic, but in fact have deeply damaging consequences for any feminist *politics* that declines to address them. In her famous “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Lorde writes that racism within the feminist movement has had the effect of reducing Black women’s point of view to trivialities or tokens; in essence, of *reducing* the language through which Black women can speak. Lorde writes that while “I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized” in the dominant culture, such misrecognitions come at a particularly steep political price when they explicitly breach the promise of reciprocity that inheres in terms like “sisterhood.” Writing of the misrecognition she experienced in reading Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, she writes, “[It] is

⁵²⁵ Garber, *Identity Poetics*, 109.

⁵²⁶ Zerilli, “A New Grammar of Difference.”

terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much touches mine [...] I felt that you had in fact misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of Color.”⁵²⁷ The structured misrecognition that takes place in the misuse or breach of “sisterhood,” for Lorde, is not just an epistemological problem, but a deeply political one: it “stands as a real block to communication between us,” she writes, and “makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western european herstory is not acceptable.”⁵²⁸ Lorde thus theorizes the structured patterns of misrecognition that make up moral vulnerabilities as both the cause and the symptom of hierarchy between women; however, she also points out that until Black (and) lesbian feminists confront this reality, no amount of epistemological maneuvering will resolve the problem.

Finally, if Lorde thematizes the structured patterns of misrecognition as *political* problems, Wittig takes this argument a step further still in her essay “On the Social Contract.” There, she argues that the structured patterns of misrecognition of the sort of politics that Lorde mourns in her “Open Letter” are at the heart of the very condition of the modern body politic: the egalitarian social contract. Indeed, in her reading of Rousseau in *The Straight Mind*, she suggests the social contract in Rousseau’s thought is so perfectly reciprocal that each individual is essentially *interchangeable* with all the others. It is a promise in which all individuals, groups, or classes are able to call others to account, to bear responsibility for the agreed-upon rules and norms of the society. Yet

⁵²⁷ Audre Lorde, “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983); 68.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

although all modern subjects are born into a social contract in which “enjoying a reciprocal commitment... would be a necessary condition of our freedom,”⁵²⁹ she argues that in reality this condition “[has] been appropriated for so long by the dominant group (men over women) [because] they have been used to mean both abstractly and concretely humanity as male.”⁵³⁰ The social contract as it has existed historically, for Wittig, is thus both “a philosophical and political abuse.”⁵³¹ Moving beyond Lorde’s conception of the breach of reciprocity as a problem internal to feminism, Wittig thus argues that the asymmetry of address, structured patterns of misrecognition, and inability for Black (and) lesbian women to constitute themselves as subjects are in fact *paradigmatic political problems*.

Asymmetries of address – the inability to use language reciprocally – are thus the vehicle by which the very conditions of the body politic can be breached. However, while this breach occurs through the “appropriation” of the use of language itself, the structured patterns of misrecognition that the breach effects is not simply an epistemological problem, nor can it be resolved by pointing out the inherent instability of categories like “the agent” or “the subject.” For both Lorde and Wittig, then, this breach threatens the very notion of freedom itself:

The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow
or a symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury [...]

⁵²⁹ Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); 35.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free.⁵³²

Recognition and The Social Contract

Moral vulnerabilities, as theorized by Wittig and Lorde, are thus breaches in the very underpinnings of the body politic; they entail breaches in the promise of *mutual recognition* that underwrites the social contract. For both Wittig and Lorde, such breaches cause problems far deeper than the epistemological ones associated with the critiques of agency and identity: they threaten the very possibility of speech, and therefore the crucial moment of recognition, that a body politic requires. The need for recognition, they argue, is a fundamental political need; without it, political relationships cannot move forward. As Lorde puts it in her “Open Letter,” the political betrayal occasioned by breaches in the social contract raise questions about the very possibility of relationships, political and otherwise: “*This is not a rhetorical question,*” she writes, “in order to come together, we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.”⁵³³ As I will argue for the remainder of this chapter, Wittig’s and Lorde’s use of the social contract to describe the harms done to the body politic by relations of moral vulnerability requires attention to the dynamics of misrecognition; equally, they require a fuller account of how reciprocal recognition would both *repair* and *remake* the body politic

⁵³² Audre Lorde, “The Black Unicorn,” *The Black Unicorn: Poems*. (New York: Norton, 1995 [1978]); pp. 3.

⁵³³ Lorde, “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 70. Emphasis mine.

itself. However, their emphasis on misrecognition – and therefore the political need for a more adequate recognition of the speaking subject – adds yet another fold to the ways in which their work has been misread and narrowed by debates in political theory since the 1990s. Indeed, in addition to the idea that appeals to agency and identity serve only to police the boundaries of community membership, appeals to recognition have been roundly rejected by theorists writing in the wake of queer critique.

Like the concepts “identity” and “agency,” “recognition” is regularly associated in political theory with regressive politics that reify the very relations that they purport to subvert. In fact, for many contemporary theorists, the critique of recognition is tightly entangled with the problems of agency and identity themselves. If all articulations of an “I” or a “we” entail the exclusion or discursive erasure of some “Other,” the thinking goes, then any social body premised on claims about what *we* share will, inevitably, succumb to the dynamics that Sina Kramer describes as the “constitutive exclusion” of the social body. While certain figures like Black (and) lesbian women are necessary “Others” against which the body politic is defined, they are neither totally excluded from the scene nor intelligible within it. Such figures, Kramer writes, are “unintelligible,” yet they “lie ambiguously both within and without that space, paradoxically both grounding and troubling the distinctions that structure political bodies and the terms of political agency. They are excluded *within*.”⁵³⁴

This claim is not an abstract one, but in fact emerges from a longstanding examination of the ways that social bodies such as those founded by the social contract

⁵³⁴ Sina Kramer, *Excluded Within: The (un)Intelligibility of Radical Political Actors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

have functioned historically. As thinkers like Carole Pateman and Charles Mills remind us, the social contract has historically been used to deny that sexual or racial domination have ever occurred at all, thus preventing women and people of color from making claims for justice on society, even as they *require* the “constitutive exclusion” of those “unintelligible” subjects. “The social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory,” writes Mills, “is not a contract between everybody (“we the people”), but between just the people who count, the people *who really are people* (“we the white people”).”⁵³⁵ For most critics of the social contract – including Pateman and Mills – the breaches in the social contract that Lorde and Wittig detail are thus not so much violations of a good-faith promise of reciprocal recognition as they are its very unspoken conditions. Again, as Mills points out,

Racism, racial self-identification, and race thinking are then not in the least “surprising, “anomalous,” “puzzling,” incongruent with Enlightenment European humanism, but *required* by the Racial contract as part of the terms for the European appropriation of the world.⁵³⁶

Similarly, Pateman suggests succinctly that “Contract is far from being opposed to patriarchy; contract is the means through which modern patriarchy is constituted.”⁵³⁷ In this commonplace reading of the contract the very promise of equality *depends* on the unacknowledged but necessary relationship between “personhood and subpersonhood.”⁵³⁸ In stark contrast to Wittig’s claims that the promise of recognition under the social contract has been *breached* (and can therefore be remade or repaired),

⁵³⁵ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); 3. Emphasis mine.

⁵³⁶ Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 122.

⁵³⁷ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018 [1988]); 2.

⁵³⁸ Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 53.

Pateman's and Mills' readings of the social contract instead suggest that, historically speaking, recognition was never intended to be reciprocal in the first place. In short, the constitutive exclusion of certain (non-white, non-male) subjects cannot be resolved by appealing to the mutual recognition guaranteed in the social contract, for it is *precisely* the act of excluding them from recognition through which the contractors constitute themselves as a body politic.

How does one repair a promise that was never proffered in good faith? In response to this paradox, queer and feminist theorists following the broadly poststructuralist rubric have concluded that gendered, raced, and sexual hierarchies can be resolved by appealing to the promise of reciprocal recognition no more than they can be achieved by "realizing" the unfinished ideals of some originary contractors. Instead, appeals to recognition in the wake of the 1990s misreadings of lesbian feminism are commonly understood as "wounded attachments," those political impulses which Wendy Brown explains are "tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure."⁵³⁹ Wounded attachments, according to Brown, emerge when historically oppressed groups (say, Black (and) lesbian women) claim these purportedly stable identity categories in order to make political claims as injured "minority" groups. Because these identity categories, as we have seen, are presumed to rely on essentialist understandings of the agent and to assume that the experiences of certain perspectives and positions within the group can stand for the whole, they deprive themselves of the capacity to articulate their injuries on terms other than those given in

⁵³⁹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 59.

liberal, statist, or capitalist terms. Such invocations of “politicized identity,” writes Brown, do not and cannot articulate justice in terms of democracy, but rather “demand... *recognition as identity*.”⁵⁴⁰ Yet however much these identities seek recognition for the harms they have endured from the state, from the body politic, or from the unmarked relations of capital, such recognition can do nothing more than reify the status quo:

In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past – a past of injury, a past as a hurt will – and locating a “reason” for the “unendurable pain” of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it. Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain.⁵⁴¹

For Brown, then, the presumed failures of “identity” as a locus for political action renders suspect the very agential action of seeking recognition – of *reaching for subjectivity* – under the faulty premise of the social contract.

Finally, then, we can see fully how thinkers like Wittig and Lorde are captured in a tight network of association between several concepts. First, identity is inherently unstable; second, because of this instability, any form of action that begins with identity is doomed to seek a form of recognition will fail to achieve the agential transformation of the social field that Lorde and Wittig seek; finally, the desire for agency articulated through identity actually *reinscribes* the very impossibility of speech that these actors seek to undermine. In the wake of critiques of the social contract offered by feminist and critical race scholars, contemporary political theorists like Brown have concluded that *all* uses of the “utopian dimensions” of the egalitarian social contract will enact similar

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

relations of authority and subordination. This critique of recognition can be found in the work of several prominent contemporary theorists – so much so that the turn to the social contract as a way of theorizing the asymmetry of address (an explicit turn in Wittig’s work and one implicit in Lorde’s) seems completely anachronistic, at best, and highly problematic, at worst. If the social contract relies fundamentally on exclusionary and regressive concepts like agency and identity – concepts that inaugurate the very “constitutive exclusions” that oppressed groups would contest – why continue to invoke it at all?

Finding the “Utopian Dimension”

Contemporary readers of Wittig and Lorde in the wake of this spirited debate about recognition might be forgiven, then, for dismissing, minimizing, or even excising those elements of their work that appear to be entangled in debates over what Charles Taylor calls “judgments about equal worth.”⁵⁴² If claims about recognition are ensnared between a faulty universalism, on the one hand, and “wounded” pleas for recognition, on the other, then many critics have followed thinkers like Butler and Brown in arguing that the turn to concepts such as the social contract are relics of a less avowedly poststructural time. As I suggested in Chapter 3, however, what are often glossed as “identitarian” claims about recognition from the 1980s cannot be so easily dismissed when we consider them in the context of the larger writing community of lesbian feminism, in which the primary goal was not realizing the promise of liberal equality nor dictating the “correct”

⁵⁴² Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Gutman. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); 25-74.

revolutionary position, but *remaking* relations of inequality into relations of accountability. I have been arguing throughout this chapter that we should see Lorde's and Wittig's reliance on concepts like identity and agency as central to this reparative practice, not because they have failed to fully divest themselves of their complicity in power, but precisely because they offer the radical possibility of *remaking* the very relationships that make up the body politic.

In light of this context, we might return to the question: How does one go about repairing or remaking promises that have been as totally breached as the promise of reciprocal recognition? For Wittig, this is precisely the reason to turn to the social contract. Repairing the social contract, she argues, is eminently possible because the very concept of the "contract" relies on the continual articulation and rearticulation of its terms in the present moment. Whereas the body politic presumed by theorists of "covenant, compact, agreement" had assumed "an initial covenant establishing once and for all the binding of people together," Wittig argues that in fact a body politic must be *remade as real* in every present moment: "whatever its origin," she writes, a body politic under the social contract "exists here and now, and as such it is apt to be understood and acted upon. Each contractor has to reaffirm the contract in new terms for the contract to be in existence."⁵⁴³ To the extent that the social is a kind of invitation to establish the terms of recognition, Wittig explains, it "[becomes] an instrumental notion in the sense that the contractors are reminded by the term itself that they should reexamine their conditions. Society was not made once and for all. The social contract will yield to our action, to our

⁵⁴³ Wittig, "On the Social Contract," 38.

words.”⁵⁴⁴ In other words, Wittig argues that the breaches in the social contract are not due to the *fact* of having defined a public, however exclusively, but rather to the fact that these publics enable an asymmetry of address that requires the marginalized to choose between speaking in terms foreign to them *or not speaking at all*. What if, Wittig seems to suggest, we were instead to build publics in which bearing a responsibility for reciprocal address was the *condition* of membership?

If Wittig raises the question of a new body politic inaugurated by the repair of the social contract, Lorde pushes this question directly to the center of any feminist politics. Indeed, in “The Master’s Tools,” Lorde argues that

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, *divide and conquer must become define and empower*.⁵⁴⁵

For Lorde, the “personal visions” that “lay the groundwork for political action” are made possible only when Black (and) lesbian feminists reach for full subjectivity; as she notes earlier in the remarks, the reciprocal recognition – the “interdependency” – between women that such subjectivity would require “is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.”⁵⁴⁶ While her argument that “divide and conquer must become define and empower” seems to evoke the kind of lingering attachment to identity and agency that underpin queer critiques of the 1980s, Lorde’s use of the verbs “define and empower,” read in this context, become actively and

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁴⁵ Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007 [1983]), 112. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 111.

strongly associated with the very possibility of a new social contract. Indeed, she continues:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. *Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.*⁵⁴⁷

In other words, Lorde here advocates for an explicit practice of interdependency, in which the “freedom which allows the *I* to *be*” is the condition of “new ways of being in the world.” Without such a practice, any politics is but “the grossest reformism,” incapable of repairing, let alone remaking, social or political relationships. Here, then, Lorde explicitly links the substantive concepts identity, agency, and recognition that I have been arguing are central to 1980s feminism to the notion of a new “lesbian body politic,” a social body born of the capacity for speech, sustained by mutual recognition, and generative of new practices even “where there are no charters.”

If the transformation of the social contract into a new body politic is the condition of freedom and self-determination for Black (and) lesbian feminists, what kind of practices does this rearticulation, term by term, entail? Given that the breach in the social contract functions by *reducing* the use of language to certain terms, to undertake a practice of repair is to realize, as Wittig puts it, that “the fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire.”⁵⁴⁸ In other words, it is true that the reduction of language to the “thought of

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁴⁸ Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 10.

domination” makes the articulation of Black (and) lesbian subjectivity impossible in the terms given in power. But if such subjects have “no real existence” in the body politic – if “lesbians, for their part, are silent – just as all women are as women at all levels”⁵⁴⁹ – then the possibility of repairing and remaking the social contract will require the articulation of that which is “illusionary for traditional male culture.”⁵⁵⁰ In short, it will require the articulation of those ways of being which *are not yet written*, those realities that remain “fictional” in language, despite having a real presence in the world:

*Our reality is the fictional as it is socially accepted, our symbols deny the traditional symbols and are fictional for traditional male culture, and we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us.*⁵⁵¹

Lesbians, in other words, are precisely those people who *cannot exist* under the current terms of the social contract. But because their existence is as-yet unwritten, their point of view is an optic through which to imagine how radically the terms of the body politic would need to change in order for Black (and) lesbian subjects to attain a “real” existence – that is, to be recognized as subjects in the body politic.

The practice of writing the “not yet written,” which appears in Wittig’s work as the transformation of literary forms through the linguistic “war machine”⁵⁵² appears as an even stronger claim to in Lorde’s writing. The notion that repair will require a forward-looking activity of *writing the never previously written* is, indeed, the central theme of

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁵⁵² For an extended analysis of this term in Wittig’s thought, see Linda Zerilli’s “A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig’s Poetic Revolution,” *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Shaktini. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); 87-114.

Lorde's work throughout the 1980s. Although she does not address the social contract directly, she does consistently argue throughout her career that language has the capacity to inaugurate a new body politic; it is what replaces "old patterns of relating" with "a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us."⁵⁵³ Like Wittig, who took the task of "writing the never previously written" to mean that the lesbian body politic would emerge only through the activity of *writing* oneself into subjectivity, Lorde approaches the task of rewriting the social contract through the activity of poetry. "This is poetry as illumination," Lorde writes of the activity of naming "those untamed longings for something different and beyond what is now called possible," – "for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt."⁵⁵⁴ For Lorde, writing the self not only requires one to carefully consider one's own knowledge and experiences, but also requires questions about how such knowledge is shaped in relation to and with others: "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice," she writes in the opening sentences of her "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. "To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?"⁵⁵⁵ The text answers this question plainly: Lorde owes her voice not only to her own capacity for language, but to her interdependencies with the women who have shaped her every experience. Indeed, *Zami* concludes with the acknowledgment that the

⁵⁵³ Lorde, "Transformation," 43.

⁵⁵⁴ Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," 36.

⁵⁵⁵ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. (Freedom: Crossing Press, 2001 [1982]); 3.

lesbian body politic inaugurated by mutual recognition will be a community achievement:

We carry our traditions with us. Buying boxes of Red Cross Salt and a fresh corn straw broom for my new apartment in Westchester: new job, new house, new living the old in a new way. Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance.

Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.

Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.⁵⁵⁶

Both Wittig and Lorde, then, use their work to imagine what such a transformative recognition might look like, and both conclude that it would entail thinking *beyond* the reduced language available to Black (and) lesbian feminists in order to reclaim the “utopian dimension” of the social contract. If such reciprocal relationships remain a fiction, they are a fiction that Black (and) lesbian feminists can and must write.

We might pause to note, at this point, how far Wittig’s and Lorde’s arguments about remaking the social contract is from the critical assessment of recognition in much contemporary political theory. Whereas many contemporary theorists argue that demands for recognition are doomed to reify the very hierarchies of intelligibility that they seek to contest, Wittig and Lorde have shifted the terrain not only to suggest new, alternative uses of identity and agency, but also to argue that they are in fact the very *conditions* of a new social body. Claims about moral vulnerability – about the failures of reciprocity that for Wittig constitute the breach in the social contract – are thus less invocations of

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 255-256.

excluded “others” demanding inclusion in existing structures of recognition than they are attacks on the reduced language in which the marginalized are compelled to speak. To be recognized as a *subject*, a “whole person,” requires more than a “gift” that assumes and strengthens existing material and discursive hierarchies, as Brown suggests. It also requires far more than the validation of quasi-sovereign identity claims. Instead, to demand accountability for relations of moral vulnerability is to demand that one is recognized in ways that, by definition, exceed traditional channels for extending recognition. Just as their work exceeded commonplace debates over identity and agency, then, fuller attention to the politics of repair that Wittig and Lorde develop in their writing demonstrates the limitations of these contemporary debates, both in grappling with the politics of the 1980s and in imagining *new* forms of recognition.

The Lesbian Body Politic: Some Resonances

So far, I have argued that far from being regrettable and excisable vestiges of a reactionary lesbian feminism, Lorde’s and Wittig’s emphasis on the practice of reaching for subjectivity is in fact a central thematic in their work. Moreover, this thematic points us directly to how they understand language – the ability to *speak oneself* – as a condition of freedom in the lesbian body politic they hope to inaugurate. As we have seen, both writers argue that the primary function of power is to reduce language – and therefore the capacity of the oppressed to speak – in terms *other than* those that reinforce and recodify existing relations. Yet because the social contract – and, with it, the very possibility of a body politic – depends on language, this reduction of language need not be true. The ability to speak, they suggest, “can be *either* radically egalitarian, permitting anyone to

appropriate and deploy its communicative power, *or* it can preempt whole categories of people from engaging in equal exchanges...”⁵⁵⁷ Reclaiming the “utopian dimension” of the social contract, then, becomes the mode and measure by which Wittig and Lorde argue that the social body might be repaired.

Many contemporary theorists writing in the wake of queer theorists’ (mis)readings of Lorde and Wittig are unlikely to be persuaded, at first glance, that claiming the “utopian dimension” of the social contract will be enough to overcome the paradoxes of freedom that inhere in analyses like Butler’s or Brown’s. However, when we distance Lorde and Wittig from their position as the “vanishing mediators” of these frameworks, we can see how their attempts to remake the body politic through practices of writing and reaching for subjectivity intersect with several increasingly prominent strains of political theory that contemporary theorists *do* take quite seriously. Two conversations in particular stand out to me as points of intersection between Wittig’s and Lorde’s politics of repair and contemporary theories of justice: a conversation around the capacity of Indigenous self-determination to exceed and transform settler-colonial hierarchies and a conversation around the historical task of racial reparations.

I want to suggest, then, that understanding identity, agency, and recognition in lesbian feminism of the 1980s as exceeding their (mis)readings both calls attention to the substantive political tasks they delineate *and* contributes to a larger shift in political theory towards rethinking the assumptions that we make about the nature of political community, injustice, and redress. Recall, first, that moral vulnerabilities cannot be

⁵⁵⁷ Cindy Patton, “Guerrilleros Warfare: Monique Wittig, Straight Shooter,” *The Village Voice: The Queer Issue: Identity Politics and the New Gay Order*. 38 no. 26 (August 30, 1992). Emphasis mine.

reduced to the kinds of injuries that we normally think of as constituting oppression or injustice. For example, the problem facing Black (and) lesbian feminists are not simply that racism and homophobia *exclude* these subjects from fully participating in the economy by denying them jobs, or that these relations of power bar them from gaining the full rights of citizenship, however much these injustices may also be true. The specific problem that Black (and) lesbian feminists identified throughout the 1980s was an additional injury: it is the inability to even *speak* about these injustices in terms that do not reduce and misrecognize them as problems of unequal protection under the law, on the one hand, or as cultural challenges to a pluralist multiculturalism, on the other.

If moral vulnerabilities must be recognized in ways that exceed the normal channels for interpreting injury, the rehabilitation of the social contract that Wittig and Lorde articulate thus requires that we imagine a fundamentally transformed social body – one in which the promise of reciprocal accountability is attended by the full capacity of subjectivity for all *before* presuming to proffer political solutions. It is the promise of a “lesbian body politic,” in which the task of politics is neither to adjudicate good and bad subjects, nor to conclude that “old patterns of relating” have irreparably weakened the social body. In keeping with their understanding of injustice as a *reduction of language* that prevents certain subjects from being or becoming speaking subjects, both Lorde and Wittig argue that the task is to lend a granular attention to the *terms* on which debate takes place, as well as the names in which the body politic is articulated.

Attention to the usage of identity and recognition in the work of Lorde and Wittig, then, *exceeds and transforms* commonplace debates in political theory. Thinking with Wittig and Lorde suggests not that the project of responsibility and repair should lie in

discerning the implicit equality of the social contract as it was founded historically, but rather that we need radically new ways of thinking about and working towards equality, reciprocity, and the capacity for self-determination. The path they chart, I want to suggest, is undoubtedly intersectional: it requires not only recognition, but a care for the very *terms* on which recognition is proffered. Such a shift in the valences of recognition and responsibility are intersectional because, at heart, they respond directly to both the critiques of dominant logics by intersectional thinkers and attempt to work through the moments of refusal that so often accompany the extension of recognition to oppressed groups.

This final point underwrites what lesbian feminism, which I have here read through the optic of Audre Lorde and Monique Wittig, share with contemporary bodies of theory that seek to move beyond the critique of exclusions and hierarchies in modernity. Far from allowing Wittig and Lorde to remain the “vanishing mediators” of queer theory simply because they wrote about the political subjectivity of lesbian women, their work shares its substantive political concerns with a wider range of political concepts and practices emerging in struggles of race and Indigeneity. I would like to conclude, then, by pointing out two areas of political theory with which lesbian feminism shares its concern for *reaching for subjectivity*.

First, Wittig’s and Lorde’s share an emphasis on the capacity of self-determination to fundamentally transform the ways that we understand and respond to hierarchies with Indigenous activists and scholars, who have continually suggested that any form of mutual recognition must occur on terms that take seriously the grounded practices – and not just the “rights” of property and citizenship – of Indigenous peoples

and communities. Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson write, for example, on the limitations of any form of recognition that fails to grapple with *both* the “dispossession of Indigenous bodies from Indigenous lands” *and* the ways that settler-colonial hierarchies sustain relations of vulnerability by limiting the possibility of Indigenous self-determination. Settler-colonial relationships, they write,

systematically [regulate] the generative relationships and practices that create and maintain Indigenous nationhoods, political practices, sovereignties, and solidarities. The state-sanctioned murdering, assimilating, and disappearing of Indigenous bodies (asymmetrically distributed across genders) are, as Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson says, a direct attack on Indigenous political orders because these bodies generate knowledge, political systems, and ways of being that contest the broader governmentality and thus make dispossession all the more difficult to achieve.⁵⁵⁸

Coulthard and Simpson suggest that settler-colonial relationships function not only by enacting material violences, but by regulating the very language in which these injustices can be registered. Resistance to this economic, cultural, and linguistic regime – a resistance they name “grounded normativity” – might look something like Lorde’s and Wittig’s approach to transforming the social body through a rigorous and unflinching appeal to one’s positionality, and through a rewriting of the very terms of the social body:

What we are calling ‘grounded normativity’ refers to the ethical frameworks provided by these Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge. Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitative manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself

⁵⁵⁸ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68 no. 2 (2016): 254.

generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which *we practice solidarity*.⁵⁵⁹

Elsewhere, Coulthard describes the practice of “self-recognition” required by such a “grounded normativity” in ways that strengthen the association between an anti-colonial Indigenous politics and the lesbian body politic I have drawn out here. Like the lesbian body politic, Coulthard’s expectation for anti-colonial politics figures the practice of *self-recognition* as the condition for the emergence of new political relationships. Citing bell hooks, Coulthard argues that an anti-colonial practice of grounded normativity will “minimally require that we stop being so preoccupied with looking ‘to that Other for recognition;’ instead we should be ‘recognizing ourselves and [then seeking to] make contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner.’”⁵⁶⁰ To write a new body, anti-colonial body politic, he suggests, would require us to imagine ways to *exceed* the paradoxes of agency and recognition under settler-colonial regimes; it would require a politics that is “about critically reevaluating, reconstructing and redeploying culture and tradition in ways that seek to prefigure, alongside those with similar ethical commitments, a radical alternative to the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination.”⁵⁶¹

If the language of repair that I have argued is central to lesbian feminism of the 1980s can be usefully put into dialogue with a prominent strain of anti-colonial Indigenous politics, it is also useful for understanding the accelerating discussions of racial reparations in the United States. Following Lawrie Balfour’s careful analyses of

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 254.

⁵⁶⁰ Glen Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 456.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 456.

discourses around reparations in the United States, I would argue that the repair Wittig and Lorde advocate is less a form of legal or cultural recognition, but rather an effort to rectify the “memory suppression” that has accompanied the use of reductive language. As Balfour puts it,

Properly conceived, a program of reparations for slavery and segregation could help to stretch the bounds of the thinkable by reorienting Americans to see their history from the perspective of the former slaves and their descendants.⁵⁶²

In other words, like Wittig and Lorde, Balfour suggests that the project of reparations cannot be reduced to narrow identity claims or appeals to state recognition; instead, they require a shift in the very lens through which we see and understand history – that is, they require us to see from the “point of view of the oppressed.” Moreover, however, while racial reparations may still exist outside of “the bounds of the thinkable” by many Americans, theorists need not conclude that the kinds of redress they would require are foreclosed entirely by the reduction of the thinkable. Such a conclusion, Balfour suggests,

elides those reparations claims that go beyond good and evil, that contest the assumptions of liberal legal discourse and imagine how to evoke the complex haunting of the American present, that aspire to obtain redress without requiring that African Americans present themselves as helpless victims or as super-Americans, and that attempt to harness state power and criticize it simultaneously... If the political energy and purpose generated in the pursuit of reparations does not represent a promising example of democratic politics, then what does?⁵⁶³

Balfour’s claims echo Ta-Nehisi Coates’ popular articulation of “the case for reparations,” in which he argues that “the popular mocking of reparations” – its very

⁵⁶² Lawrie Balfour, “Unreconstructed Democracy: W.E.B. DuBois and the Case for Reparations,” *American Political Science Review* 97 no. 1 (2003): 43.

⁵⁶³ Lawrie Balfour, “Reparations after Identity Politics,” *Political Theory* 33 no. 6 (2005): 805

‘unthinkability’ – “is fear masquerading as laughter.”⁵⁶⁴ For Coates, to work towards making fiction of racial reparations a reality would be to confront “something unmentionable about America that integrationists dare not acknowledge – that white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.” Coates continues,

And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations – by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences – is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely [...] What I’m talking about is more than the recompense for past injustice – more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal... Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.⁵⁶⁵

A *reparative* approach to redress, for Coates and Balfour as for Coulthard, Simpson, and Betasamosake, is not a “wounded attachment,” a foolhardy appeal to state power, or a failure to “queer” identity or agency. Quite the opposite: repair insists on writing the full subjectivity of the oppressed not *in spite of* histories of reduction, erasure, and vulnerability, but precisely *because* of them.

In “Poetry is not a Luxury,” Lorde writes that “we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage.”⁵⁶⁶ Asked what she meant by such heretical actions in an interview in 1980, she answered:

Loving women, for one. Being free. Those things that have never been done before – whether or not it was actually done – that were kept hidden from us, held away from us. Those lies concerning what was not possible. All the rumors that

⁵⁶⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014).

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 38.

are circulated by City Hall to destroy us. The strength to run against those, when you believe no one has ever done it before, is derived from dreams.⁵⁶⁷

Loving women, being free; these are, for Lorde and Wittig, the activities “not yet written” in the terms of the body politic under the historical social contract. But they are also the activities that lesbian feminism in the 1980s tasked itself with writing into existence. The result, a “lesbian body politic” in which recognition requires a care for the very terms in which political relationships and responsibilities are founded, may still operate at the level of fiction; however, the basic promise of reciprocal self-determination that it offers is shares considerable resources with a growing field of inquiry around questions of anti-colonialism, repair, and political change. Perhaps it is time to recognize the capacities of those who reach for subjectivity; to admit that they may, finally, make real the fictional.

⁵⁶⁷ Karla Hammond and Audre Lorde, “An Interview,” 21.

Conclusion

Turning the Century:

Lesbian Feminism and Coalition

In 1981, the musician and scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon took to the stage to address the West Coast Women's Music Festival. The topic of the day was coalition – and not only because the organizers had planned it that way. The 1981 festival, in response to complaints about a lack of diversity in the previous year's program, included not only a wide range of Third World and Black women performers, including Reagon's band Sweet Honey in the Rock, but also a "Solidarity Day" program to raise awareness about political struggles in Latin America. Prior to Johnson's speech, considerable tensions around the Solidarity Day events had already roiled the festival; organizers, for example, had failed to make up written contracts for the kitchen staff and other festival workers, raising questions of race and class before the festival even began.⁵⁶⁸ But it was the Solidarity Day events that brought the issue of coalition to the fore: as one (white) attendee of the weekend later wrote,

Let me describe the setting. The stage on which the events of solidarity day were scheduled was located right next to the lake. It was situated in the play area, beer sold to the left, craftspeople set up nearby. Women attempting to speak of the very real struggles of people in Nicaragua, Chile, El Salvador and Argentina were drowned out by splashing, frisbee-throwing and yelling of playing women throughout the play area in front of the stage.⁵⁶⁹

The attendee, angered at the "irony of hearing about people dying in struggle while white women played" and at the fact that two of the three Solidarity Day speakers were white

⁵⁶⁸ Becky W. Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁵⁶⁹ Barbara Gagliardi, "West Coast Women's Music Festival," *Big Mama Rag* 3 (Nov. 1981), 3.

(“to protect the emotional security of white women”), goes on to describe a near-forgotten drama. A group of about four hundred, multi-racial (of about four thousand total) attendees staged a protest of the handling of Solidarity Day, storming the same stage that Reagon would later occupy and speaking about anti-racism within the women’s movement. The statements, given by three women (“Black, Latina, and white”), “were pulling us together, to dialog about racism” and made the case “that as women we could make a difference.”⁵⁷⁰ However, the protesters were quickly pulled off stage and charged, as one participant put it, with having “invalidated the work that had been done, and with trying to destroy the festival [...] Some white women yelled for us to go home and stop ‘ruining their good time.’”⁵⁷¹ Dispirited, the protesters retreated from the festival, unsure how to proceed.

It was in this context in which Reagon began her speech, which is by far the most famous document emerging from the festival (due, in large part, to its inclusion in Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls* anthology). “I’ve never been this high before,” Reagon began:

I’m talking about the altitude. There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can’t get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they’re going to do when they can’t think properly. I’m serious about that. There probably are some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain – and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you’re staggering around [...]

I wish there had been another way to graphically make me feel it because I belong to the group of people who are having a very difficult time being here. I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 22.

you're *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't you're not really doing no coalescing.⁵⁷²

Given the events of the weekend, Reagon might have been forgiven for anger, for a refusal to engage, for a full retreat from the stage. Instead, however, in these opening lines she describes the context of the festival as an incitement and an indication that the coalition-building that feminists desired was *really* happening. Coalition, she argues, is a kind of discomfort; it's messy, unsettled, contentious, emotional, and taxing. Thought in this light, she goes on to argue, the dramatic outcome of raising questions of racism and marginalization at the festival weren't symptoms of feminism's imminent failure, as many post-hoc observers of the tumultuous events of the 1980s have come to conclude. Rather, Reagon insists that these seeming fractures were necessary growing pains: by the 1980s, having been called to account by women from around the world, from marginalized communities within the United States and within the movement itself, feminists were engaging in politics in new and uncharted ways. "We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is 'yours only' – just for the people you want to be there," she argues:

Even when we have our 'women only' festivals, there is no such thing. The fault is not necessarily with the organizers of the gathering. To a large extent it's because we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up.⁵⁷³

For Reagon, the only alternative to "hiding" is "to take the next step" and recognize that "we've got to do [coalition] with some folk we don't care too much about. And we've got

⁵⁷² Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 356.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 357.

to vomit over that for a little while. *We must just keep going*” by holding others accountable for the persistent hierarchies and breaches of trust that characterize political work. Faced with issues of internal racism and homophobia, feminists would need to carry on the difficult work of speaking with others. “You’ll have to challenge them about it,” Reagon argues; *real* coalition work will require finding ways of articulating vulnerability, holding others accountable, and working through the differences that make reciprocity a political achievement.

The lesson Reagon hoped to impart, then, was neither that feminists should settle for nothing less than a harmonious coalition, nor that they should give up the hope of collective action in favor of “getting the L out” or simply “speaking for oneself.” Rather, she defends a conception of coalition that I have argued was at the very heart of feminist, and particularly lesbian feminist, politics throughout the 1980s: one premised not on harmony but on a confrontation with persistent issues of inequality and broken trust, not on exemplarity but on accountability, not on inclusion but on repair. It is a conception that I have argued requires attention to relationships of accountability and vulnerability, discomfort and working through. “Coalition work,” as Reagon puts it, “is not work done in your home:”

Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They’re not looking for a coalition; they’re looking for a home!⁵⁷⁴

If coalition work is something that cannot be done at home – something that must be done in the streets – then, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, it is something

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 359.

that requires committing to the challenges of *publicity* rather than the comforts of *identity*.

The subtitle of Reagon's 1981 speech is "Turning the Century;" in it, she asks how, and how well, feminists will continue the work of coalition-building into the twenty-first century. Yet if we take seriously the conception of coalition-building that I have outlined here, there is reason to believe that Reagon, along with thinkers like Rich, Frye, Lugones, Moraga, Smith, Wittig, and Lorde, would be alarmed. In the contemporary moment, two decades into the twenty-first century, mainstream feminist and queer activists seem to have largely occupied themselves with splitting hairs over "identities" and "identifications,"⁵⁷⁵ advocating for inclusion in basic institutions such as the nuclear family and the military,⁵⁷⁶ evaluating the "queer" credentials of the first gay presidential candidate, and debating the merits of corporate "pinkwashing" at Pride events and in state policies.⁵⁷⁷ Yet if the narrow scope of these projects threatens to

⁵⁷⁵ As disputes over the acronym "LGBTQIA+" suggest, a huge amount of political energy has been spent on defining, revising, and disarticulating an ever-expanding list of sub-identities. As part of its celebration of the fifty-year anniversary of Stonewall, for example, *The New York Times* ran an interactive feature soliciting individualized identities alongside a "guide" outlining the basic definitions of sixteen sub-categories of "queer." Michael Gold. "The ABCs of LGBTQIA+" *The New York Times* (June 21, 2018 [revised June 7, 2019]), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/style/lgbtq-gender-language.html>

⁵⁷⁶ One example of the case for inclusion into the institutions of marriage and the military is Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), which argues that inclusion of "homosexuals" in these institutions is, in fact, useful for conservative politics insofar as it would deal neatly with issues of sexuality and identity while declining to alter any longstanding liberal values or social arrangements.

⁵⁷⁷ The term "pinkwashing" denotes the practice of embracing LGBTQ people in a superficial way – for example, designing marketing campaigns or state benefits that

undermine the liberatory goals of the feminist and queer projects, queer theorists have reacted by veering in no small way from the coalitional approach that the thinkers populating these pages advocate.

Aware of the deep limitations of mainstream political queer politics, many feminist and queer theorists have rightly made appeals to broaden the scope of political struggle. Lisa Duggan describes mainstream inclusionary efforts, for example, as projects of “homonormativity,” which, in her view, represents “a linchpin for [a] broader political vision” premised on “[constructing] a new public/private distinction that mobilizes gay equality rhetoric on behalf of a miniaturized state and constricted public life, confined to a very few policy decisions, coupled with a vast zone of ‘private’ life dominated by ‘voluntary’ economic and civic transactions, however conglomerated, oligarchic, and unaccountable.”⁵⁷⁸ In other words, homonormativity not only describes the paradox of “mainstreaming” queer issues, but also captures the cooptation of a transformative queer project by neoliberal and conservative forces. Thus hamstrung by a restriction of political vision, Duggan bemoans the fate of queer politics in a neoliberal world: “There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or of an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever.”⁵⁷⁹

target LGBTQ people – while simultaneously supporting, either financially or politically, anti-LGBTQ policies and practices.

⁵⁷⁸ Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 188.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

Having lost the “critical edge” of the liberation projects of an earlier era – yet unwilling to revisit them for fear of their “inherent” essentialism – feminist and queer theorists have reacted not by confronting directly the broken promises and painful inequalities at the heart of the queer coalitional project, but by doubling down on their break with an older, purportedly more retrograde lesbian feminist framework. As Jasbir Puar puts it in *Terrorist Assemblages*, queerness *resists* “intersectional and identitarian paradigms” premised on “an unrelenting epistemological will to truth.”⁵⁸⁰ Instead, “[q]ueer times require *even queerer* modalities of thought, analysis, creativity, and expression in order to elaborate upon nationalist, patriotic, and terrorist formations and their imbricated forms of racialized perverse sexualities and gender dysphorias.”⁵⁸¹ In other words, if queer theory has failed to make the inroads in disrupting homonormativity that its proponents hoped, it’s because it wasn’t queer *enough*. Arguing for a move away from an analytical framework of identification and (dis)identification, Puar thus suggests that we consider queerness in its capacity as “assemblage.” “As opposed to an intersectional model of identity” that “demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time,”⁵⁸² queerness as assemblage is “a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks, [drawing] together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces.”⁵⁸³

At the same time that thorny questions of responsibility and accountability are regularly left out of the picture in mainstream queer politics, then, what is taken to be

⁵⁸⁰ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 216.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 203. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 211.

radical queer and feminist theory is, increasingly, premised on confronting these issues in highly abstract ways that seem to revolve, curiously and somewhat troublingly, on the question of whether *all* marginalized subjects produced in and through such “affective conglomeration[s]”⁵⁸⁴ ought to be theorized as “queer.” Building on Puar’s account of “homonationalism,” for instance, C. Heike Schotten puts queerness not only at the heart of “sexual politics,” narrowly defined, but at the historical intersection of sexual normativity and the global logic of settler colonialism. For Schotten, if settler colonialism is the defining political assemblage of our era, it is also a conceptual problem for which queer theory has paradigmatically useful answers. “Puar’s account of queerness,” Schotten argues,

veers from any simple conflation with gay and lesbian subjects. For her, queerness functions as a biopolitical determination regarding which populations are sifted out and accorded recognition, regulation, benefits, and rights, while leaving others to degenerate, die off, or be killed.⁵⁸⁵

While for Puar the “queer” therefore represents not an identity but a “regulation of life,” Schotten takes a step further, arguing that the construction of queerness as a paradigmatic form of regulation ought to push queer theorists to consider queerness a “structural categorization.” If queerness, for Schotten, designates a structural relationship to power that underpins settler colonial society, then queer theory is “essential to formulating a resistant, liberatory politics that opposes it.”⁵⁸⁶ Indeed, “Anyone outside of or opposed to the logic of [settler colonial moralism],” Schotten argues,

is *by definition* queer, a determination that escapes identitarian categories and yet is inescapably determinist. On this account, queerness is indeed exceptional... because it is the name of what must be abjected from the social order in order for

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁵⁸⁵ Schotten, *Queer Terror*, 144.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., xx.

it to coherently constitute itself *as* a social order. Queerness, that is, cannot *but* be dissident... [queer people] are, in their very existence, a threat to the social order in themselves and ultimately unintelligible to it.⁵⁸⁷

Thus, for Schotten, a queer theory up to the task of radicalizing and transforming the contemporary political landscape is not a naively identitarian one, but must be one capable of that makes it possible “to apply [queerness] to a broader logic of American nationalism that also stigmatizes or *queers* black and brown people.”⁵⁸⁸

As I argued in Chapter 1, such attempts to deploy feminist and queer critique as *exemplary* political positions could not be farther from the coalitional politics of lesbian feminism. The distance between Reagon’s 1981 festival appearance and Schotten’s book, for example, is incredibly stark. On the one hand, Schotten proposes that queer theorists smooth over the frictions that have long characterized the relationships between Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer movements by theorizing these marginal positions as structurally indistinct, at least in relation to the overarching logic of settler society. On the other hand, Reagon argues that the central task of coalition is to resist at all costs the temptation to theorize away the real political, historical, and conceptual conflicts between and among members of a coalition. Doing so, she maintains, would be to create a “little barred room” where “you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world...

It’s like, ‘If *I* was really running it, this is the way it would be.’”⁵⁸⁹ She continues,

Of course the problem with the experiment is that there ain’t nobody in there but folk like you, which by implication means you wouldn’t know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world. Now that’s nationalism. I mean it’s nurturing, but it is also nationalism... Nationalism

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 116. My emphasis.

⁵⁸⁹ Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 358.

at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples.⁵⁹⁰

Reagon thus points out that “acting out community” in the way that Schotten describes – that is, *theorizing* a community into being where none existed before and insisting on its conceptual coherence – misses the fundamental purpose of coalition building: to develop the resources to grapple with the fact that “no matter what, there will be one or two of us who have not bothered to be like you.”⁵⁹¹ Ironically, reading from Reagon’s point of view, Schotten’s attempt to theorize the queer as an inherently and capaciously resistant figure strangely evades the work of imagining a politics premised on something other than abstract, structural, and homogenizing categories.

Certainly many queer theorists would resist Reagon’s claim that a politics of exemplarity might be, at heart, a form of “nationalism,” by which she means a broad pattern of thinking that extends beyond (settler) colonial nation-building but also, among other things, texts like Jill Johnston’s *Lesbian Nation*.⁵⁹² Still, even as alarm about homonormativity and homonationalism grows, critics of the queer status quo struggle to articulate their failures on terms other than those at the heart of many “nationalist” projects – namely, abstract inclusion, harmony, and internal coherence. In a recent report

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 359.

⁵⁹² Johnston famously makes the case in *Lesbian Nation* that lesbianism is a necessary political position to inhabit in order to achieve structural change: “Proceeding from the premise that women are oppressed by the heterosexual institution, that women are an oppressed class, that from this point of view the man has become (if he was not always) the natural enemy of women, it follows that the continued collusion of any woman with any man is an event that retards the progress of woman supremacy.” *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Touchstone, 1973), 276. It is in response to arguments like Johnston’s that Reagon insists in “Coalition Politics” that a really radical women’s coalition will require grappling with non-lesbian women and, indeed, confronting their homophobia head-on.

from the 2019 New York City Pride parade, for example, two New York Times reporters grapple with the fact that, fifty years after Stonewall, two divergent Pride parades seem to be tearing the movement asunder. At issue, in particular, were the issues of corporate sponsorship and police presence. On the one side, organizers in the Heritage of Pride (HOP) argue that *all* queers (including LGBT members of the police force) deserve visibility, and that corporate sponsorship of Pride is an effective way of raising awareness in the broader culture and incrementally changing the working lives of millions of LGBT individuals for the better. On the other, organizers of the Reclaim Pride counter-march argue that making space for police and corporate interests excludes and threatens poor and/or undocumented queers, queers of color, and other marginalized members of the community.

Absent a robust framework in which to evaluate these divergent claims against one another, a contemporary queer coalition that imagines itself as a *structural categorization* rather than a diverse, relational, and contestatory public will have a difficult time conceiving of these debates as *political* problems; that is, as disputes over how to move forward between groups whose powers, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities are distributed in unequal ways, both in relation to each other and to the mainstream institutions of our current political society. Indeed, rather than asking questions about vulnerability, accountability, and repair that I have suggested ought to be at the heart of coalition-building, these issues at Pride have largely been understood as philosophical disputes over the right way to conceptualize what counts as queer.⁵⁹³ “These are big

⁵⁹³ In a wildly controversial article on presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, for instance, the journalist Christina Cauterucci lays out a debate that began on Twitter, but soon blew up to a full-fledged press frenzy over whether “Mayor Pete” is “gay enough.” “Is

questions, and there aren't easy answers," the reporter concludes in the report, for example: "There isn't a solution that is going to make everyone equally happy, and that's both a simple and profound fact. I think if we *knew* the best way to protect everyone in the LGBT community, we would do it."⁵⁹⁴ The notion that the most desirable outcome of this division is finding a *solution* - simply knowing the best way to protect everyone - is a symptom of a feminist and queer scene that has ceded the ground of transformative counterpublicity and instead begins from abstract claims about structural exemplarity. Thought as questions of categorization rather than accountability, the issues of corporate sponsorship and police presence are reduced to a narrow debate over "representation" that, at worst, cast LGBT members of the police force and corporate sponsors as equally vulnerable - and therefore deserving of space and attention - to those queer people whose daily lives are disrupted and threatened by the activities of these agencies.

Yet claims of vulnerability and betrayal raised by queers of color in relation to the police and corporations are *not* equivalent to appeals to broad-net inclusivity. Nor are they conceptual matters that challenge us to more accurately identify "the queer's"

Buttigieg a run-of-the-mill white male candidate," she asks, "or does his sexuality set him apart?... Has Buttigieg faced setbacks or barriers to success because he's gay? Does he have an identity-specific worldview that would inform his work as much as, say, [Kamala] Harris' experience as a black woman would inform hers? Would a win for Buttigieg be as historically significant and culturally meaningful as a win for a member of an underrepresented race or gender?" Cauterucci hypothesizes that these questions can be traced back to the fact that "Buttigieg isn't just gay - he's also white, male, upper-class, Midwestern, married, Ivy League-educated, and a man of faith." Christina Cauterucci. "In a Diverse Candidate Field, Is Pete Buttigieg's Sexuality Factoring Into His Appeal?" *Slate* (March 28, 2019); <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/03/pete-buttigieg-gay-diversity-white-male-candidate.html>

⁵⁹⁴ Natalie Kitroeff and Shane O'Neill, "The Daily Podcast: A Clash Over Inclusion at Pride," *The New York Times* (June 29, 2019); <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/29/podcasts/the-daily/pride-parade-stonewall.html>.

relationship to power *par excellence*. As I argued in Chapter 4, when movement politics are flattened to matters of categorization rather than accountability and repair, it becomes impossible to hear the point of view of the marginalized on their own terms. As the debate over what “counts” as queer continues to founder on arguments about the visibility of queer cops and corporate marketing, for example, little attention is paid to the increasingly urgent calls for accountability and repair from the most marginalized queer women and lesbians. As movements like #SayHerName⁵⁹⁵ and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)⁵⁹⁶ make clear, far too little attention is paid to the vulnerability of the most marginalized women, including lesbians and queer people. Worse still, when attention *is* paid to these issues, they tend to be collapsed into abstract questions of representation rather than as demands for accountability and repair. Nonetheless, the leaders of these movements, like the lesbian feminists I have discussed in this work, insist that the path towards justice requires not more coherent “structural

⁵⁹⁵ See, for example, #SayHerName’s recent report, written by intersectional scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie, which makes sense of the various ways that the intersection of gender, race, and class make Black women particularly susceptible to police violence and neglect. In it, the authors call for “Expanding the analysis of police violence beyond lethal and excessive force to include sexual harassment and assault, policing of gender and sexuality, and profiling and targeted enforcement” in order to remedy the marginalization of Black women from the work of movements like Black Lives Matter. “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women,” *African American Policy Forum* (2015), 23.

⁵⁹⁶ In June, 2019, a massive final report on the findings of the National Inquiry into MMIWG was released in Canada. The report makes the case that systemic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people is a “crisis:” “In this report,” the Commissioner states in the report’s preface, “we use hard words to address hard truths like genocide, colonization, murder and rape. To deny these hard words is to deny the truths of the families and survivors, front-line workers, and grassroots organizers. We used hard words because the violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people is a difficult, critically important crisis to address and in which we all have a role.” *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (2019), 6.

categorizations, but “*self-determined solutions*” – in other words, to take these movements seriously is to understand that addressing these violences, at minimum, “requires new solutions as conceived, driven, and managed by those affected.”⁵⁹⁷ As one Indigenous organizer argued in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, “self-determination is really a *starting point*...”⁵⁹⁸ It is only when self-determination – the capacity to make political claims in one’s own terms – rather than internal coherence becomes a *condition* of our coalitions that they will begin to be held accountable for the breaches, silences, marginalizations, and hierarchies that persist in them.

Taking these lessons seriously will require that queer coalitions continue to confront the sexual politics at the heart of (settler) colonialism and racial exploitation if they are to get anywhere. At the same time, however, they push feminist and queer scholars, in particular, to acknowledge the dangers in collapsing specific struggles into one another – of arguing that because of the intersecting nature of oppression, all marginal subjects share a structural relationship to power that can smooth over the disjunctive, sometimes contradictory, needs of different political movements. Rather than ask whether Indigenous or Black subjects are structurally *queer*, that is, grappling with the issue of self-determination as a condition of coalition-building would have us ask what kinds of non-settler institutions, relationships, and practices a transformative counterpublic would need to build, as well as how these institutions, relationships, and practices would need to be disarticulated from the conceptual scaffolding of nationalism

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 221.

and sovereignty. Lesbian feminism, as I have suggested throughout this work, offers a compelling account of what such a project might look like in practice.

To be sure, though, while I have argued that these queer maneuvers excise the dynamic and compelling political resources of lesbian feminism in the name of anti-essentialism (whether or not the politics they reject are *actually* essentialist), some readers may still question whether it is really necessary or desirable to ‘go back to go forward.’ That is, does *lesbian feminism* really hold adequate resources for confronting these problems? Doesn’t this era of political theorizing simply have too much baggage to furnish a more intersectional or coalitional politics in the present? Certainly, the broader political landscape in which feminists and queers must act looks radically different today than it did in the 1970s and 80s; in fact, some might argue, the political winds of neoliberalism, Trumpism, populism, and alt-rightism have made it necessary to step outside of the tracks of old ways of thinking that impotently replay debates over a liberal world order that is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings has spelled out in particular detail the dangers of “going back” to feminisms past only to bemoan the inadequacy or “depoliticization of [current] feminist commitments.”⁵⁹⁹ Such backward-looking gestures, Hemmings writes, might look something like this:

We have lost our way but we can get it back, if we apply a little common sense to our current situation. We may have been convinced by the turn to language, a poststructuralist capacity to deconstruct power and value difference, but we know better now. We know now that critique does not alter power relations and indeed that these have endured and strengthened...Perhaps earlier feminist theories might

⁵⁹⁹ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

still have something to teach us about what we have in common as women, despite the valuable critiques of essentialism that have come since.⁶⁰⁰

Hemmings' sketch of "return narratives" does strike a familiar chord in much feminist political theory, as I suggested in my introduction. In this project, though, I have tried to reconstruct lesbian feminism as a radical counterpublic *not* to suggest that lesbian feminist conceptions of shared oppression, common interests, and unified revolutionary consciousness remain salient today despite the valuable lessons of anti-essentialism. Instead, I have tried to argue quite the opposite: lesbian feminism, I have insisted, was *never* as unified, homogenous, or essentialist as these narratives tend to suggest. In fact, if lesbian feminism ought to be characterized at all, it should be for its proponents' persistent and rigorous attention to the breaches, asymmetries, and injustices within their movement.

Lesbian feminism, then, is not something to which to *return*; it is a way of raising questions that, at the end of the day, are the stuff of politics: What kinds of politics emerge when we observe a situation like the disarray over Solidarity Day at the West Coast Women's Music Festival – or, for that matter, at the 1979 *Second Sex: Thirty Years Later* conference – and to decide, nevertheless, to carry on with the project together? How can we avoid dismissing such disputes simply as problems of "identity politics" which require a more exemplary political stance? How might a diverse, imperfect coalition confront and negotiate its internal inequalities not in the service of transcending them, but in order to better understand the challenges that arise when we engage in politics with and among others?

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.

These questions, more than any one answer to them, I have argued, are the political lessons of lesbian feminism that are worth understanding, if not because lesbian feminists have some unique wisdom to impart then simply because these questions will persist whether or not we theorize new categories of marginality in more exemplary or accurate ways. But the sheer degree to which these questions were at the fore during the 1980s is also the very feature of this era of theorizing that most often contributes to contemporary theorists' assessment of it as fractious, exclusionary, and flawed. Part of what it means to return to lesbian feminism or to recognize its mode of theorizing as transformative, then, is not simply to push contemporary theorists towards "better" methods or more enduring truths, but to recognize that the seeming contestability – its demands, its discomforts, its attempts to negotiate *through* rather than around issues of political intractability – is lesbian feminism's political contribution. At the same time, it alerts us to the fragility of this insight: that, looking back, we see not a demand for accountability but an inherently doomed contest over identity is a good indicator of just how difficult it is to keep a politics of publicity, accountability, and repair in view. Finally, then, in taking to heart these political and historical fragilities, it is worth remembering the words of Adrienne Rich with which I began Chapter 1:

*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
From where does your strength come?*

I think somehow, somewhere
every poem of mine must repeat those questions
which are not the same.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Speaking for Others," *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 97-119.
- "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 13 vol. 3 (1988): 405-436.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherríe Moraga, ed. *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Anzaldúa and Moraga. (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983 [1981]).
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]).
- Aristotle. *The Rhetoric*, trans. CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018).
- Arnold. "Feminist Presses and Feminist Politics," *Quest* 3 vol. 1 (Summer 1976): 18-26.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Politics of Identity," *Daedalus* 135 vol. 4 (2006); 15-22.
- Balfour, Lawrie. "Unreconstructed Democracy: W.E.B. DuBois and the Case for Reparations," *American Political Science Review* 97 no. 1 (2003): 33-44.
- "Reparations after Identity Politics," *Political Theory* 33 no. 6 (2005): 786-811.
- Barad. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28 no. 3 (2003): 801-831.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, trans. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier. (New York: Vintage, 2011).
- Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- ed. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib

- (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- Benjamin, Jessica. "Letter to Lester Olson," in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 33 no. 3 (2000); 286-290.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "What can Queer Theory Teach us About X?" *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 343-349.
- "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages," *Cultural Anthropology* 26 no. 4 (2011): 683-691.
- Bettcher, Talia and Ann Garry, eds. *Hypatia* 24 vol. 3 (2009).
- Bickford, Susan. "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship," *Hypatia* 12 no. 4 (1997): 111-131.
- Bourg, Julian. *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. (Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).
- Bracewell, Lorna . "Beyond Barnard: Liberalism, Antipornography Feminism, and the Sex Wars," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 no. 1 (2016); 23-48.
- Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Bulkin, Elly, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith. *Yours in Struggle: Three Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (New York: Long Haul Press, 1984).
- "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics," *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (1980): 3-22.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1990]).
- "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Abelow, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993); 307-320.

-- "Against Proper Objects," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 vol. 2 and 3 (1994); 1-26.

-- "Merely Cultural," *The New Left Review* (January-February 1998):33-44.

-- and Joan Scott, eds. *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

-- *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Canning, Kathleen. "Feminist Theory after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs* 19 no. 2 (1994): 368-404.

Canovan, Margaret. "Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm," *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hichman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 179-210.

Carbado, Devon W., Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson. "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review* 10, vol. 2 (2013): 303-312.

Chambers, Simone. *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Clausen, Jan. "The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community," *Sinister Wisdom* 2 (1976); 92-131.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* (June 2014).

Cobble, Dorothy Sue. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* Vol. 3 (1997): 437-465.

-- "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *The Du Bois Review* 1, vol. 1 (2004): 27-45.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

-- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Coulthard. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

-- and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. "Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 68 no. 2 (2016): 249-255.

-- "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 no. 4 (2007): 437-460.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139-167.

-- "From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control," *UCLA Law Review* 1418 (2012): 1419-1472.

-- "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *The Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

-- and Andrea J. Ritchie. "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women," *African American Policy Forum* (2015).

Crowder, Diane Griffin. "From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory: Implications for Political Movement," *GLQ* 13 no. 4 (2007): 489-503.

Dawson, Michael C. "A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," *Public Culture* 7 (1994), 195-223.

Desmoines, Harriet. "Notes for a Magazine," *Sinister Wisdom* 1, (1976).

Dietz, Mary. "Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt," *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah*

Arendt, ed. Bonnie Honig. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995) 17-50.

Disch, Lisa. "More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21 no. 4 (1993); 665-694.

-- "'French Theory' Goes to France: *Trouble dans le Genre* and 'Materialist' Feminism – A Conversation Manqué," *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, ed. Carver and Chambers. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 47-61.

Douglas, Carole Anne. "2nd Sex Thirty Years Later: Feminist Theory Conference," *off our backs*, (December 1979).

Duchen, Claire. *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterand*. (New York: Routledge, 1986).

Duggan, Lisa. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 175-194.

Duong, Kevin. "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality?" *Politics & Gender* 8, vol. 3 (2012): 370-386.

Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Enke, Finn (Anne). *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

-- *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

-- "Women's Liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly," *Feminist Studies* 41 no. 1 (2015); 138-149.

Farge, Arlette. *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995 [1992]).

Fernandes, Leela. "Unsettling 'Third Wave Feminism:.' Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect," *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 98-120.

Firestone, Shulamith. "Abortion Rally Speech," in *Notes from the First Year* (New York: Radical Women, 1968), 24-26.

Foucault, Michel. *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007 [1997]).

-- *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. Smith. (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

-- *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

-- *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1978).

Fox Keller, Evelyn. "Feminism and Science," *Signs* 7 no. 3 (1982); 589-602.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

-- "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 279-289.

Freeman, Estelle. "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31 vol. 4 (2000): 727-44.

Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1983).

- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- Gagliardi, Barbara. "West Coast Women's Music Festival," *Big Mama Rag* 3 (Nov. 1981) 3-22.
- Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
- Giffney, Noreen and Michael O'Rourke, eds. *The Ashgate Companion to Queer Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2016 [2009]).
- Gilmore, Stephanie, ed. *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
- Gordon, Linda. "The Women's Liberation Movement," *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of the American Women's Movement* (New York: Norton, 2014), 69-146.
- Goya, Paula M. and Michael Hames-Garcia, ed. *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- Grant, Judith. *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- Gutmann, Amy. and Dennis Thompson. *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Boston: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]).
- Halperin, David. "Is there a History of Sexuality?" *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale, and Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 416-431.
- Hammond, Karla. "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *The American Poetry Review* 9 no. 2 (1980): 18-21.

Hanking, Kelly. *The Girls in the Back Room: Looking at the Lesbian Bar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Harding, Sandra. *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986);

Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Hartsock, Nancy. "Fundamental Feminism: Prospect and Perspective," *Building Feminist Theory*, ed. Charlotte Bunch (New York: Longman, 1981), 32-43.

-- "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical

Materialism," *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (New York: Kluewr, 1983), 283-310.

-- "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," *Cultural Critique* 14

(1989-90): 15-33.

Hawkesworth, Mary. *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation*

(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

-- *Gender and Political Theory: Feminist Reckonings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

Hekman, Susan. "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," *Signs* 22 no. 2

(1997): 341-365.

Hemmings, Clare. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham:

Duke University Press, 2011).

Hesford, Victoria. *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

-- "Feminism and its Ghosts: The Spectre of the Feminist-as-Lesbian," *Feminist Theory* 6 vol. 3

(2005): 227-250.

Honig, Bonnie. "Toward an Agonistic Feminism," *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*,

ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 135-166.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

-- "marginality as a site of resistance," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*,

ed. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornell West
(Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 341-343.

Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women are White, All the*

Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

Jaggar, Alison M. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983).

Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press,

1997).

Johnston, Jill. *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Touchstone, 1973).

Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Political Writings*,

Second Edition, ed. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60.

King, Katie. *Theory in its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements*.
(Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995).

Kramer, Sina. *Excluded Within: The (un)Intelligibility of Radical Political Actors*
(Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2018).

Lara, Maria Pia. *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity

Press, 1998).

Laughlin, Kathleen, Julie Gallagher, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, Premilla Nadasen,

Stephanie Gilmore, and Leandra Zarnow. "Is it Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (2010); 76-135.

de Lauretis, Teresa. "Introduction to Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991).

-- "Upping the Anti in Feminist Theory," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and

Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990): 255-270.

-- "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies*, 16 no. 1 (1990): 115-150

Lesbian Avengers. "Out Against the Right: An Organizing Handbook" (1995).

Lesbian Avengers, LACROP Organizing Files. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984).

-- *The Black Unicorn*. (New York: Norton, 1995 [1978]).

-- "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978); 4-17.

-- *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. (Freedom: Crossing Press, 2001 [1982]).

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard

University Press, 2007).

Lugones, Maria. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2 no. 2

(1987): 3-19.

-- and Elizabeth Spelman. "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" *The Women's Studies International Forum* 6.6 (1983): 573-581.

Luxon, Nancy. *Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Malinowitz, Harriet. "Lesbian Studies and Postmodern Queer Theory," *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zimmerman and McNaron (New York: Feminist Press, 1996), 262-268.

Martin, Biddy. "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]" *The Lesbian and Gay*

Studies Reader, ed. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 274-293.

- Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978).
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty* (New York: Dover, 2002).
- Mills, Charles. *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- Murib, Zein. "Rethinking GLBT as a Political Category," *LGBT Politics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Marla Brettschneider, Susan Burgess, and Christine Keating (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 14-33.
- National Inquiry of Canada. *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (2019).
- Nestle, Joan and Jim Monahan. "Conversation about Gay and Lesbian Archives," *The Gay Insurgent* (1978).
- Nichols, Robert. "Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory*, 46, vol 1 (2018): 3-28.
- National Organization for Women. *NOW Guidelines for Feminist Consciousness-Raising* (Washington, D.C.: NOW, 1982).
- Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
- Olcott, Jocelyn. *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- Olson, Lester. "The Personal, The Political, and Others: Audre Lorde Denouncing "The Second Sex Conference," in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 33 no. 3 (2000): 259-285.
- Orleck, Annelise. *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Pateman, Carole. "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy," in *Private and Public in Social Life*, ed. Stanley Benn and Gerald Gaus (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

-- *The Sexual Contract*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018 [1988]).

Patton, Cindy. "Gerrilleres Warfare: Monique Wittig, Straight Shooter," *The Village Voice: The Queer Issue: Identity Politics and the New Gay Order*. 38 no. 26 (August 30, 1992).

Phelan, Shane. *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

-- *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Turning the Century: Coalition Politics," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 356-368.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986 [1976]).

-- *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. (New York: Norton, 1979).

-- *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1986).

-- "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 vol. 4 (1980): 631-660.

-- "Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?" *Sinister Wisdom* 18, (1982): 83-91.

Riley, Denise. *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Roth, Benita. *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Roof, Judith. "Lesbians and Lyotard: Legitimation and the Politics of the Name," *The Lesbian Postmodern* ed. Laura Doan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 47-66.

-- *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267-293.

Rudy, Kathy. "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory," *Feminist Studies* 27 no. 1 (2001); 190-222.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Schotten, C. Heike. *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Schulman, Sarah. *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Scott, Joan. *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

-- ed. *Women's Studies on the Edge* ed. Scott. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

-- "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797.

Sedgwick, Eve. *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Seidman, Steven. "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes," *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105-142.

Sinister Wisdom Archives (1976-1990), <http://sinisterwisdom.org/archive>

Sinister Wisdom. "Publishers and Printers: Interviews" and "Alternatives to Print," *Sinister*

Wisdom 13 (1980); 71-106.

Smith, Barbara. "Queer Politics: Where's the Revolution?" *The Nation* 257, vol. 1 (July 5,

1993): 12-16.

-- "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher* 7 (1978): 20-27.

-- "Response: February 3, 1982," *Sinister Wisdom* 20 (1982): 100-101.

-- ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color

Press, 1983).

Smith, Dorothy. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

Spelman. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon

Press, 1988).

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*,

17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81.

Spinster, Sidney. "Response," *Sinister Wisdom* 18 (1982): 105.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A*

Reader, ed. Williams and Chrisman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 66-111.

Springer, Kimberly. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) Collection (1971-2013). Pembroke Center Archives at

Brown University, Providence, RI.

Stoler, Ann Laura. "On Recursive Histories: Beyond Rupture and Continuity"

Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Sturgis, Susanna J. "Is this the new thing we're going to have to be politically correct about?"

in *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (1985): 16-27.

Sullivan, Andrew. *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage

Books, 1996).

Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition," *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of*

Recognition, ed. Gutman. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017).

Taylor, Verta and Leila J. Rupp. "Women's Cultural and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," in *Signs* 19 no. 1 (1993); 32-61.

Tirabassi, Katherine E. "Journeying into the Archives: The Pragmatics of Archival Research," in

Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition, ed. Ramsey, Sharer, L'Eplattenier, and Mastrangelo. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 169-180.

Thompson, Becky W. *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Triadafilopoulos, Triadafilos. "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere," *The Journal of Politics* 61 no. 3 (1999): 741-757.

Tully, James. *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Valk, Anne M. *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington*

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

Walker, Margaret Urban. "Moral Vulnerability and the Task of Reparations," in *Vulnerability:*

New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy, ed. Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 110-133.

Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

-- *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Weeks, Kathi. "The Vanishing *Dialectic*: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 no. 4 (2015); 735-754.

Wiegman. "Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern," in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed.

Laura Doan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); 1-22.

-- and Elizabeth A. Wilson. "Introduction: Anti-Normativity's Queer Conventions," in *differences* 26, vol. 1 (2015): 1-26.

Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

-- *The Lesbian Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

-- Monique Wittig Papers, Beinecke Library Rare Book and Manuscript Collections at Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Whittier, Nancy. "Identity Politics, Consciousness-Raising, and Visibility Politics," *The Oxford*

Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism, ed. Holly McCammon, Verta Taylor, Jo Reger, and Rachel L. Einwohner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 376-397.

Young, Iris Marion. *Democracy and Inclusion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Zerilli, Linda. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

-- "A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig's Poetic Revolution," *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Shaktini (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 87-114.